

IDIC

IDIC LOG 16



*a Star Trek
fanzine*

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THE SPECTRES OF THE PAST

by

Lorna Elliott

This story follows on from those events depicted in Star Trek IV, and takes place after the crew of the Starship Enterprise have taken command of NCC 1701-A and left on their first trial run.

Chapter 1

Kalinh brought the aircar to a stop as she drew up outside her father's house. She looked out across the sandy wastes of the outlands, cast in deep shadow by the setting sun. The rocky canyons looked eerie in the purple dusk of evening and she shivered, remembering the time when, as a child, she had got lost and wandered aimlessly for days before being found amongst the boulders.

Her thoughts returned to the present as she wondered why her father had summoned her to his house on the eve before she was due to leave for patrol duty along the Klingon border of the Neutral Zone. With a last glance at the setting sun, she climbed out of the aircar and quickly made her way towards the dimly lit porch of the house.

When she knocked on the door it was opened by the family servant, who led her into the study.

"Commander Krell will not be long. Can I get you anything while you are waiting?" he enquired.

"No, thank you, I am quite all right. You may leave me."

The servant bowed his head as he backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. Kalinh had known him a

long time, and had always felt uneasy in his presence. She got the distinct impression that if he was allowed to speak his mind he would certainly let her know what he thought about the suitability of females as warriors, especially those who achieved the distinction of command. As Kalinh surveyed the small study she again started to wonder at the reason for her summons.

Krell had never been a real parent to her. He was a Commander himself, and his duties had kept him away from his family for long periods at a time. After her mother's death Kalinh stayed with an aunt, and was brought up without any contact with her real father. As soon as she was of age she had entered the Klingon Space Fleet at the request of her uncle. She had not minded because in some way she had hoped to impress her father and make him notice her. On gaining her first command she had taken her mother's maiden name as her own, not wishing to be accused of obtaining favours because of her father's connections at Headquarters.

Three months ago, she had heard that Krell had been injured in the line of duty whilst on patrol. She had not been allowed to visit him in the hospital and when she had tried to find out how the accident had happened she had been notified that the details were classified. Later she had been told that her father had been relieved of his command and assigned a desk job within the High Command.

What had her father done to

warrant his demotion? she wondered.

Before she could surmise further the door opened and her father walked into the room. Kalinth sighed inwardly at his appearance. Once a tall man with an air of authority and a physique that gave an indication of his true strength, the man who now stood before her was just a shell of his former self. When he spoke his voice was no longer strong and authoritative, but somehow weak and frail.

"Daughter, thank you for coming," he said as he moved across the room. Kalinth nodded in acknowledgement and seated herself opposite him at his desk.

Sensing the questioning look in his daughter's eyes Krell leant forward, a deep frown creasing his brow as he contemplated his next words.

"I'll come straight to the point, Kalinth, as I am not even sure that I should confide in you. All I ask is that you let me finish what I have to tell you and that you speak to no one of this meeting."

Intrigued, Kalinth prompted her father to continue.

"You have no doubt heard about the fate of my half brother Kruge, but what you are not aware of is that secretly the High Command have put a price on the head of the person responsible for his death. Officially they would deny any such order, of course, but great rewards await the warrior who brings news of his execution."

Kalinth interrupted suddenly, realising the reason for Krell's untimely demotion. "Is that how your ship became involved and you were injured?"

"Yes, but I'll get to that. Please let

me explain further - time is short. Kruge's death and the reaction of Starfleet to our demands for justice angered the Emperor greatly. He felt that the Federation defended the accusations because this man is a revered figure in that organisation."

Krell paused, seeming to choose his next words carefully. "Because Kruge was my half brother and also a fellow Commander, it was felt that I would have justifiable cause to seek revenge. If I was successful, then it would be explained as a personal act of revenge without prior authorisation. I would be granted asylum and given safe haven deep within Klingon territories. Unfortunately, my attempt failed miserably, and it was decided that a demotion and a transfer to desk duties would convince the Federation that my actions had not been condoned by the Empire."

Krell looked up at Kalinth pleadingly. "I cannot continue my vendetta without a ship. I now ask you as a blood relative and a Klingon warrior to seek out this man and destroy him."

"Who is this man you wish me to seek out and destroy?" Kalinth queried.

Krell turned away from his daughter. "I can hardly bring myself to say his name."

"You must," she demanded.

Her father stood up, tall, anger glinting in his eyes. This was the man she knew of old. Krell's huge fist crashed onto the table. "His name..." Her father's face became clouded with intense hatred. "His name is James T Kirk." He spat out the words with all the venom that he could muster.

Kalinth sat back and contemplated in silence. She had met Kruge on only a

few previous occasions, all of which were in the line of duty. She had not taken to him at all, thinking his attitude to be very conceited and overbearing. However, Klingons were loyal to their blood relatives, especially those of a warrior clan. The death of Kruge had obviously upset her father more than he was willing to admit. The fact that he could not bring himself to speak the name of the man responsible was evidence of that.

The identity of James Kirk was far from being a secret within the Empire. Every warrior relished the opportunity of a confrontation with him and his ship, a chance to uphold the honour of the Klingon Empire and to defeat the Federation's finest Starship.

Kalint turned to her father, who had moved to the window and was looking out at the darkening sky.

"I will of course do as you bid, both for you and our clan. I will seek out James Kirk and make sure that he knows who it is who will be his executioner before he dies. Do not fear, father; thy will be done."

Krell turned and smiled for the first time that evening. "I knew you would not fail us, my daughter." Straightening his back he gave the Klingon salute. "To the Empire," he said.

"To the Empire," Kalint replied, and return the salute fiercely.

Turning on her heel she strode purposefully out of the room. Krell stared at the vacant space she had left, until he heard the front door shut heavily. He knew that it would probably be the last time he would see his daughter even if she was successful. When the Emperor had devised this complex subterfuge and

had asked him to enlist his daughter's help in carrying out the deed, it was clear to both of them what fate would await her when she returned.

Chapter 2

"Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 8392.5

"We have just finished a trial run of the new Enterprise NCC 1701-A, and Mr Scott has reported that there is a minor warp imbalance at speeds over Warp 2. Starbase 11 has the facilities to undertake minor repairs, and we are now heading there under impulse power.

"Starfleet Command have been notified of our destination and I have been granted permission to authorise shore leave to all non-essential personnel. I understand that the facilities at the base have been greatly improved, with the recent construction of a large leisure complex containing shopping malls, nightclubs and ornamental gardens. I have also been told that the upgrades to the Holograph Suite are something to be experienced.

"Let's hope that this visit is more pleasant than the last time that I was there.*

"The crew have certainly earned the rest, and everyone seems to be looking forward to their leave eagerly. Unfortunately, I do not share in their excitement about the forthcoming stopover. A few sleepless nights have left me

(*) Court Martial.

feeling overtired, and I just don't seem to be able to work up any enthusiasm for a 'bout of shore leave'.

"It has been nearly a year since my son's death, and lately I have found myself thinking about the time that we shared. It has become increasingly difficult to push those memories to the back of my mind. Maybe this stopover will give me some time to be alone with my thoughts."

The wall intercom in Kirk's quarters beeped.

"Kirk here," he responded, switching off the log.

"Sorry to bother you, Captain, but you asked to be notified the minute we came within range of Starbase 11."

"Very well, Mr Spock, I'll be right there. Kirk out."

As Kirk made his way to the Bridge he mused over the events since their encounter with Khan; the emptiness he had felt after Spock's death, and the subsequent joy when he had first seen Spock alive on Vulcan after the Fal Tor Pan. Now that he had been given a second chance, Kirk promised himself silently that nothing would separate them again if he could help it.

The turbolift doors opened and Kirk stepped out onto the Bridge, feeling slightly less depressed than he had felt earlier. The First Officer acknowledged his arrival by vacating the centre seat and Kirk sat down quickly, noting the presence of Doctor McCoy on the upper Bridge level next to Uhura.

"No work in Sickbay, Bones?" he jibed.

"Actually, you'd be surprised at how quickly everybody cures themselves at the first hint of shore leave. Nobody wants to be in Sickbay while everyone else is having a good time enjoying themselves!"

He smiled at Kirk from where he sat perched on Uhura's communication panel, but the Captain ignored the light-hearted humour as his own mood slowly deteriorated once again. *Why is everybody so damned happy?* he thought. *More importantly, why don't I feel the same excited anticipation for shore leave?*

"Uhura, could you raise Starbase Administration. Inform them of our arrival and request clearance to allow crew personnel the use of the base facilities." As Uhura acknowledged his request, Kirk turned towards his Chief Engineer.

"Mr Scott, is everything in order for the repairs to the warp drive to get under way as soon as we arrive?"

"Aye, sir," the Scot replied. "My engineering staff have been briefed and will work on a shift rota alongside maintenance crew from the base. I'll need to shut down power in order to effect the repairs, but if all goes well we should have the Enterprise ready to leave in about ten days time."

"Very well, Mr Scott, you may carry on. I'm sure you have a lot to do."

Kirk dismissed his Chief Engineer, then chastised himself mentally for being so abrupt. He looked quickly at the Bridge crew to see whether they had noticed, but they were too experienced at hiding their reactions. Turning towards the Science station, he rose slowly from his seat.

"Mr Spock, I have your request to

remain on board during our stay. May I ask why?"

"Yes, Captain. I have been doing some private research over the last two weeks, and require additional time to complete it."

Kirk came and stood beside his First Officer and waited for Spock to continue.

"Unlike Humans, we Vulcans can relax without the need to expend energy in the trivial pastimes associated with a period of shore leave."

"Oh come on, Spock," McCoy interrupted, "you're only half Vulcan, remember. Surely the Human side needs to let its hair down once in a while? Don't you agree, Jim?"

"If Spock wants to spend his shore leave working on research, Bones, that's his prerogative. Permission granted, Mr Spock."

Kirk was irritated and he couldn't understand why. *Surely it's not because Spock won't be spending his leave with me, he thought, or because McCoy has already made plans for his holiday? What's wrong with me?*

"Mr Spock, you have the con. I'll be in my quarters compiling the shore leave rotas if I'm needed."

Without a backward glance, the Captain turned away from his friends and left.

After he had gone, Spock and McCoy exchanged worried glances.

"Now I wonder what *that* was all about?" the Doctor asked.

"Maybe the Captain has something on his mind. He has seemed somewhat preoccupied over the last few days,"

Spock replied, stepping down to stand in front of the command seat.

McCoy looked towards the turbolift doors, deep in thought, making a mental note to speak with Jim later.

"Oh well, I suppose I'd better get Sickbay shut down and work out the skeleton shift personnel. You know where I am if you need me."

As McCoy left, Spock himself wondered at the Captain's recent behaviour. His mood changes and absences from the Bridge during his shift cycle had not gone unnoticed, as more and more of the Bridge crew had voiced their concerns to him. Something indeed must be troubling his friend, and he decided to find out what, as soon as his own duty shift had finished.

Chapter 3

The Klingon Bird of Prey cut through the dark cold of Federation space, undetected because of her cloaking device. Commander Kalinth sat silently at her station, surveying the crew. She had specifically hand-picked them for their youth and inexperience. She knew that an older crew would become suspicious about the orders that she would be giving during their far from 'routine' patrol mission. With this crew, she would be able to explain her actions as being authorised by the High Command, and knew that her orders would go unquestioned.

Kalinth did however have one member of her crew whom she valued greatly. She had known her First in Command, Kreen, since she had first become a Commander. He had been loyal to her ever since, never once expressing the wish for a ship of his own,

and he was on board now because Kalinth knew that she could trust him. He would follow her to his death, if necessary.

Kreen sensed his commander's eyes on him, and turned. "Is there anything wrong?"

"No, Kreen, attend to your duties. I have some matters to deal with in my quarters. You have command until I return." As she turned to leave she added curtly, "I am expecting a message from an Orion vessel. Please let me know the minute they make contact."

Kreen stood and saluted as she left. As he walked towards the command seat he recalled the unusual and unorthodox behaviour of his superior since they had set out from their home world.

When he had first boarded the ship three days ago he was surprised to learn that the original crew had been transferred at Kalinth's insistence. The replacements were straight out of training school on their first mission. He had not questioned his Commander at the time, knowing that she would explain her reasons eventually, but now he started to wonder what her intentions were.

Apart from the first day out of spaceport she had not ventured onto the Command Bridge. She had left instructions that she was not to be disturbed, and had locked herself away in her quarters. The only indications of her existence were the transmissions that she had both sent and received.

Kreen admitted secretly to himself that her behaviour had upset him. No one, not even Kalinth herself, knew of his devotion and his deep feelings for her. He had accepted long ago that it would be impossible to attempt any sort of social relationship. Kalinth's first and only

desire was for her command, and there was no room for personal 'affairs'. He lived in hope that one day her attitude towards him might change. The events of the past few days, however, had made him consider the possibility that his services and loyalty had been abused over the years.

He was suddenly brought out of his reverie by the sound of the intercom.

"First Officer Kreen, report to me in the briefing room in ten minutes."

"Yes, Commander Kalinth. I'm on my way."

He motioned the navigator to take over, and hurried towards the briefing room.

Kalinth sat quietly in her quarters, inwardly pleased with the plan that she had managed to devise. Since the meeting with her father she had spent her time trying to work out a way of exacting her revenge on Kirk, and at the same time making sure that no blame fell upon the Klingon Government. Having decided on a course of action, she had then used the computer terminal in her quarters and linked into the vast amount of medical information available to the Klingon Empire, specifically those drugs that were fatal to Humans. By chance, she had come across a particularly nasty poison whose manufacture was the sole rights of the Orions. The next step had been easier than she could ever have wished for. After requesting a confidential channel, she had contacted a personal friend who had an unusual acquaintance with a certain group of Orion pirates.

Having put into effect the first part of her plan, she tidied her desk before leaving for the meeting with her First in

Command.

Kreen stood at attention as he waited for Kalinth. He had been trying to decide on a subtle way of demanding an explanation for her strange behaviour without being dragged to the Brig and charged with insubordination. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't given much time for thought and the doors suddenly opened as Kalinth strode through.

"Have we had word from the Orion vessel yet?" she asked.

"Yes, Commander. We will be at the rendezvous point in just under two hours. The Captain seemed to think that he was carrying a cargo that would be of value to us, although I am at a loss to think what this might be."

Kreen looked at her questioningly, already curious as to her reasons behind the request for a meeting with the Orion freighter Corona in the first place.

Registering the tone of his last remark, Kalinth decided that it was time to let him in on her plan.

"We will shortly be undertaking a highly secretive mission. No one but you and I are to have any knowledge of this. As far as the rest of the crew is concerned, we are on war manoeuvres, understood?"

She waited for Kreen to reply before continuing. "I have arranged to pick up a perishable drug from the Orion Captain in exchange for a small payment of dilithium crystals. You yourself will arrange and supervise the transfer as soon as the Orion ship has appeared. Bring the cargo to my quarters, where I shall be awaiting your arrival."

"Yes, Commander. But what has this drug got to do with our mission, and why so secretive?"

Kalinth sat back in her chair and crossed her arms smugly.

"I will tell you, Kreen." And she began to outline her plan to him.

First Mate Ahrmer checked his console and turned to his superior. "We are at the rendezvous coordinates now, Shipmaster. No sign of the Klingon Bird of Prey yet."

"We would not know if she was here, fool. Her cloaking device will be activated. Our sensors would not be able to detect her."

Tharn had dealt with the Klingons enough times in the past to be well acquainted with their sense of the dramatic.

"Very well, Ahrmer, hold steady. Keep scanning for Federation Patrol Scouts. We do not want any unwelcome guests while we are making our transaction."

Tharn reflected on the message he had received from the Klingon Commander requesting his assistance. He was not a person to ignore an opportunity to strike a blow against the Federation, having had his own fair share of run-ins with Starfleet. However, this was far from being the usual method of Klingon battle tactics. Subtle techniques were not among their normal repertoire. The drug he was carrying would certainly do the job. Perhaps he should have demanded a higher price, he mused.

"Klingon Bird of Prey approaching from the rear, sir."

"Good, good. Hail them, Ahrmer. The sooner this business is over the better I'll like it."

"First Officer, we are being hailed by the Orion Captain. He says that he wishes to speak with Commander Kalinth."

Kreen acknowledged the Communications Officer and told him to route the message directly to Kalinth's quarters. After his recent meeting with his Commander he had taken a lot of time to ponder the plan that she had outlined to him. He knew the story well, of how Kruge had been defeated by the then Admiral Kirk. As a warrior himself he understood her need for revenge, and had naturally agreed to help her. After all, it was the Enterprise that had thwarted a scheme that would have brought wealth to the Klingon Empire, when they had been discovered supplying arms to the villagers on Neural(*). He himself had been a member of that scheme and therefore had his own personal reasons for wanting to see Kirk suffer.

He left the Bridge in order to make arrangements for the transfer.

Later that evening on board the Klingon Bird of Prey, Commander Kalinth waited patiently. With the Orion drug securely locked away in her quarters her next objective had been to locate the Enterprise and the infamous Captain Kirk.

Like all the enemies of the Federation, the Klingons had managed to infiltrate the ranks of Starfleet on more than one occasion. It hadn't been very

difficult to place a few loyal patriots of the Empire on remote Starbases, with direct access to classified Federation material. Kalinth had contacted one of her associates within the High Command whom she knew would give her the information she sought without questioning her motives.

Kreen had informed the crew that they were about to undertake a pre-arranged battle exercise which was to take place within Federation space. He had instructed the navigator to lay in a course for Starbase 11, and engage the cloaking device.

They had long since left the security of Klingon space, and were now maintaining battle readiness as they drew closer to their destination.

Chapter 4

Kirk lay on his bunk staring at an imaginary point on the ceiling. He had fled the Bridge half an hour earlier, after snapping at his yeoman for spilling a cup of coffee on his shirt. Everyone had seen the accident and was shocked at his show of anger. In irritation, he had handed command over to Sulu, excusing himself by explaining that he would be in Sickbay getting something for a headache. He wondered now at the reason for his irritability and depression.

Earlier, during his shift cycle, he had lost his temper with Spock when he had enquired about his welfare. He hadn't meant the Vulcan to receive the full force of his anger, but he was fed up with everybody asking if he was feeling all right, especially when it was obvious that he wasn't.

(*) A Private Little War.

The door chime sounded, interrupting his thoughts.

"Who is it?"

"Jim, it's me, McCoy. I'd like to talk to you."

Kirk swung his legs off the bunk and pressed the door release.

"Come on in, Doctor. What can I do for you?" he said tiredly, trying to keep the tone of annoyance out of his voice.

McCoy looked at Kirk with concern as he took the seat that was offered to him. He noticed the tiredness in his features, the bloodshot eyes, and his dishevelled appearance. Glancing around the room, he noted the crumpled sheets on Kirk's bed, and the uncapped pill bottle on the night table.

"I came here to find out why your name doesn't appear on any of the shore leave parties, and don't tell me it's because you don't need any, because your appearance tells me otherwise."

"Captain's prerogative, Doctor. I've decided to stay on board and catch up on some reading. Any objections to that?" Kirk replied, willing himself to remain calm.

"As a matter of fact I have. You've been cooped up on board ship for far too long without a break. You need to get away from the Enterprise and relax amongst friends, not lock yourself away in isolation."

"Doctor McCoy," Kirk interrupted angrily, "I am not in the habit of telling you how to spend your leave, kindly do not tell me how to spend mine."

McCoy slammed his fist down on the desk and stood angrily. "But that's my

point; you're not spending shore leave in any way."

His initial irritation immediately turned to concern when he saw that Kirk sat unmoving, with his hands resting limply in his lap, and his head bowed forward as he stared at the floor.

"Dammit, Jim, what's the matter with you? Tell me, please; I want to help."

Kirk was silent for a while but when he eventually looked up at his friend McCoy was shocked at the look of utter despair that he saw in his tear-filled eyes.

"I don't know what's the matter with me, that's just it. If I knew I could start to deal with it." Kirk got up and started to pace the small room. "I've tried to analyse why it is that I'm so touchy lately but the more I think about it the more hopeless it all becomes, and the more frustrated I feel."

"Why didn't you tell me how you've been feeling, instead of persecuting yourself like this? Remember, I'm the one with the medical degree, not you."

Kirk laughed. "If I came to you with every little problem that I had, I'd need to move into Sickbay permanently."

McCoy started to say something along the lines of 'that was his job', but bit back the retort, realizing that Kirk needed his help, and that this was not the time for petty remarks.

"When was the last time you slept?"

The Captain had his back to him, and McCoy could see the tensed neck muscles as he chuckled cynically. "Oh, a couple of days ago. I can't remember."

"Well then," McCoy continued, "first thing is to try and let you get a decent night's sleep. I'll just...."

"No!" Kirk turned quickly. "I don't want to sleep... I mean I can't sleep... I mean..."

At the look of horror that passed across Kirk's face, McCoy rose from his chair and quickly crossed the room. He placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and led him over to the bed.

"Now sit down and tell me why I can't give you something to help you sleep."

Kirk sat slumped with his arms resting on his knees, staring downwards. Finally he sighed and started to tell McCoy of his dreams.

"For the past four nights, every time I close my eyes to sleep I've dreamed of David on Genesis. It's so vivid, as if I'm there with him myself. I hear Kruge give the order to kill one of the landing party, then I see the fight between the Klingon and David, his horrible meaningless death, and worst of all I hear Kruge laughing, louder and louder." Kirk looked up at McCoy then. "I was there, Bones. When David was murdered by those Klingons I was there, in orbit above him. I could have done something but instead I let my son die. How many times have I saved Spock from death? How many times have I managed to get the ship out of danger? When it came to my own son, Bones, I just sat there and did nothing at all." He laughed. "What do you think of that, then? Carol was right when she said that she didn't want David in my world. Look what I let happen to him when he joined me."

McCoy sat looking at Kirk silently, not realizing until now just how distressed his friend really was.

Kirk looked up into McCoy's concerned face. "Do you know Bones, it's been a year since David died. I had a son I never knew... and now I never will." His voice started to rise hysterically.

"Jim, listen to me." McCoy grabbed Kirk's shoulders and shook him, making sure that he had his attention before he continued.

"You can't keep on like this, blaming yourself for David's death when there was absolutely nothing that you could have done to prevent it."

Kirk broke free from McCoy's grasp. "Don't you think that I keep telling myself that? But it doesn't help. The dreams are so real, I can almost hear him crying out for help."

McCoy concluded that he had been wrong when he had thought that Kirk had dealt with the grief of losing his son. It was obvious from his reaction now that he had not come to terms with the loss at all.

"Jim, you need to talk about David. If you don't, you're never going to be able to accept his death. I can help you. As your Doctor, but more importantly as your friend, let me help, please."

"How?"

"Well firstly by getting you off of this ship for a few hours." Kirk started to argue, but McCoy cut him off. "Doctor's orders, Jim."

"And then?"

"And then by using an old-fashioned therapy which will enable you to bring all your suppressed emotions to the surface, where together we can deal with them and help you to accept your loss. You've been so preoccupied with

the running of the ship, what with the probe and everything else, you've had no time to really deal with your grief. This has been building up inside you for months."

Kirk's expression was one of apprehension as he said, "Bones, I'm scared. If you make me relive David's death I might not be able to cope..."

McCoy reached out and laid a reassuring hand on his arm. "You will, you have my word as your friend. I'll be there all the time."

Kirk sighed deeply, some of his old composure returning to him. "Do I have a choice?"

McCoy smiled warmly. "Nope! Now come on, I could do with that drink and I know that you definitely need one."

The Doctor started to leave. Turning, he saw that Kirk was still seated. "Coming, Jim?"

Reluctantly the Captain rose from the bed, knowing that McCoy would not take no for an answer, and started to follow him from the room.

Chapter 5

The evening was not going according to McCoy's plans. He had persuaded Kirk to invite Spock, thinking that the Vulcan's presence might raise the Captain's spirits.

Spock had guessed that something was amiss when he had arrived in the transporter room earlier, at Kirk's insistence, and found the Doctor standing with him. Unfortunately, McCoy had not had the time to brief Spock on Kirk's mental state, and he now began to wish

that he had. The Vulcan's bedside manner left a lot to be desired. McCoy tried to lighten the atmosphere by goading the First Officer.

"Care for a glass of this, Spock?" He held up a half empty bottle of brandy. "Guaranteed to really make your hair curl."

Spock looked at the Doctor, who was grinning childishly. It was obvious from his demeanour that he had already drunk most of the bottle himself.

"Doctor, as you very well know, I do not drink alcohol; and as far as making my hair curl..."

"Oh Spock, you old devil, drop the masquerade. You know perfectly well what I mean. Isn't that right, Jim?"

Kirk had been sitting silently, staring at the untouched glass in front of him.

"What? Oh yes... I suppose so."

"Captain, are you all right? If you don't mind me saying so, you seem to be a little preoccupied."

"It's all right, Spock," McCoy interjected before Spock could put his foot it it completely. "Jim just needs to relax a little."

Kirk rose from the table, suddenly feeling the need to be alone. "Spock, Bones... I'm sorry. It was a mistake for me to come tonight. I'm not much in the mood for celebrating. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll take a walk and then beam back to the ship. Goodnight, my friends." He turned and left the table before McCoy had a chance to say anything.

"I trust that the Captain's departure was not due to anything that I said?"

McCoy sighed, still staring in the direction that Kirk had left. "No, Spock, it wasn't," he replied, aware of the hurt in Spock's enquiry. "Jim needs to relax. The strains of running the ship have started to catch up to him," he lied.

Kirk braced himself against the cold night air as he set out along the deserted concourse towards the ornamental gardens. He had thought that a pleasant walk amongst the flowers might help him clear his head and get his thoughts in order. *Damn McCoy for asking Spock to come along*, he thought. *It's bad enough that Bones knows about my dreams without my First Officer playing Mother Hen as well.* He was so deep in contemplation, that he did not notice the dark silhouette that stepped out of the shadows and started to follow him.

Although it was late into the night, the gardens were well illuminated. Kirk decided to walk through the rose garden, remembering his fondness for their perfume, and he set off in the direction indicated by the signpost.

The gardens were far from being busy, and Kirk only passed a handful of people as he walked. A young couple were seated on a bench, their features lit softly by a nearby light as they cuddled, happily sharing in a private joke. Kirk found himself wondering whether he had missed out on something by not becoming seriously involved in any of his past relationships. Shaking off the morose feelings that threatened to engulf him, he decided to beam back to the ship, to the familiar surroundings of his cabin and its solitude. He started to look for somewhere secluded where he could discreetly contact the Enterprise.

All of a sudden Kirk became aware of a presence in the bushes off to his

right.

"Hello! Is anybody there?" he called, peering into the darkness.

A tall muscular figure stepped forward into his path. "Hello, Captain Kirk."

The stranger had chosen his spot well. The street lighting did not reach this part of the walkway because of the dense overhang of the trees. All that Kirk could make out about the man's features was the set of gleaming teeth as he sneered at him.

"Do I know you?"

"Not personally, no, but you could say that we have a mutual acquaintance."

"Oh, and who might that be?" Kirk asked, not liking the way this conversation was unfolding.

A sound from behind made Kirk turn sharply, but before he could identify the other he was caught squarely on the chin with a powerhouse punch. Stunned, he sank to his knees, reeling from the darkness that threatened to take him. He was dimly aware of a pair of large powerful hands grabbing his ankles and pulling him from the path. He tried to clear his head of the fuzziness, and then summoned all of his remaining strength and kicked out at the person holding his ankles. He heard a shriek of agony as his boot connected with something soft, but his satisfaction was short lived as the other attacker kicked him fiercely in the chest, causing him to cry out with the pain. Kirk doubled over onto his knees and pulled his arms towards him in an effort to protect himself from further blows. His breath rasped as he struggled to fill his lungs.

"Come on, let's get on with it! If we

get caught we'll be in big trouble!"

"All right, all right. Don't panic, we've got plenty of time for what we have to do."

As his consciousness slowly slipped away from him, Kirk felt his arm being lifted from his side and his sleeve pulled up.

He felt a stab of pain course through his upper arm as he tried desperately to pull free from the stranger's grip. The effort took his remaining strength, and the last thing he heard was the sound of retreating footsteps as he slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

James Kirk regained consciousness slowly as he became aware of a bright light shining down onto his face. Opening his eyes he realized that the source of the light was the morning sun, and turned away from its glare. Struggling to his feet he winced as a sharp pain erupted across his chest, causing him to crouch until it subsided. Breathing slowly and deliberately, he looked to make sure that nobody was walking past and then stepped out onto the walkway.

Kirk made his way slowly back towards the main concourse where he would be able to contact the Enterprise and beam up. As he walked, he wondered about the attack. There didn't seem to have been any motive. He hadn't been carrying any money, so that had ruled out a mugging. If it was a kidnapping attempt, then why had they left him behind? He remembered that one of the attackers had used his name, so that had ruled out a random assault.

Reaching a quiet part of the

shopping concourse, he took out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in Enterprise."

"Enterprise here, Captain. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Mr Sulu, everything is fine. Why do you ask?"

"When you didn't beam back last night, sir, we wondered where you had gone. Doctor McCoy has been looking for you all morning, and he asked to be informed the minute you reported in."

Kirk thought for a moment before answering, "I see. Well I'm ready to beam up now, Mr Sulu, and I don't want you to inform McCoy that I'm back. I want a chance to get cleaned up before I speak to him. Is that understood?"

Sulu eyed Uhura suspiciously, wondering exactly what the Captain meant by 'cleaned up', but shrugged his shoulders in a resigned gesture of ignorance. "Aye, sir, prepare to beam up, Sulu out."

As the transporter effect started to envelope Kirk, he wondered amusedly just how he was going to explain his own appearance to his two Mother Hens.

Chapter 6

Uhura struggled in the workspace beneath her console. With the Enterprise in spacedock all the ship's systems had been temporarily shut down in order to carry out routine diagnostic checks. Having volunteered to stay on board as a member of the skeleton crew, Uhura had decided to make use of the free time by adding a few upgrades to the ship's universal translator computer tie in. From her uncomfortable position she was

faintly aware of the sound of the turbolift doors opening, and craned her neck to see Doctor McCoy as he stepped out.

Sulu was discussing something with a technician at the navigational console, but on seeing the Doctor approach he turned and walked towards him.

"Still no sign of Jim yet, Sulu?" McCoy said, glancing around the Bridge quickly.

Sulu blushed and looked down at his boots as he replied. "Well er... Actually, Doctor, the Captain beamed back a couple of hours ago. I told him that you were looking for him and he said that he'd catch you later."

"Why didn't you tell me, Sulu? I asked to be informed the minute he returned, or had you forgotten?"

Sulu tried to explain, hurt at the Doctor's vehemence. "I was going to contact you, Doctor, but Captain Kirk made me promise not to say anything. I assumed that he would get in touch with you himself."

"Okay, Sulu, I'm sorry for chewing you out. I know it's not your fault. I've got a lot on my mind at the moment and I know how persuasive the Captain can be when he wants to."

Before Sulu could reply the two officers were interrupted by a beep from Uhura's communications console. All three turned simultaneously, curious as to who would be hailing the Enterprise at this time. Uhura flipped the receive toggle and waited as the computer accepted and stored a taped message. After a few minutes a green light flashed on her board, indicating that the message had been logged and received. She checked the contents and turned suddenly

to look at McCoy and Sulu.

"The message is from an unknown source and is encoded for 'Captain's Eyes Only'."

Sulu frowned as he wondered what sort of message would warrant such a classification, especially while the ship was unspaceworthy, and why had there been no reply signature to identify the sender of the message?

"Well, you'd better relay it to the Captain's quarters. If it's anything important I'm sure we'll be informed soon enough."

Uhura nodded her acknowledgment. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here. What is it, Uhura?"

McCoy noted the tiredness in the Captain's voice and turned to leave for an overdue appointment, even before Uhura could finish her message.

"We've received a transmission, sir, source unknown. The message has a classification 'Captain's Eyes Only'. I'm relaying it to your quarters now." Hearing the sound of the turbolift doors close she added quickly, "Oh, and I think Doctor McCoy is on his way to see you."

Kirk sighed at the imminent confrontation with the Doctor. "Very well, Uhura. Kirk out."

The Communications Officer broke the communication and turned questioning towards Sulu, who was still looking at the closed turbolift doors.

"Don't ask me," he said, seeing the look in her eyes. "I don't know what's going on either."

In his quarters Kirk waited for the ready light on his desk monitor to tell him that the message was ready to be played back.

After beaming back from the base he had gone straight to his quarters to tidy himself up, meaning to report to Sickbay as soon as he was presentable. It was obvious from the ache in his chest that he had probably cracked a few ribs. He had also started to feel a bit nauseous and dizzy. He flexed his arm to relieve some of the stiffness as he tried to remember whether he had fallen awkwardly during the struggle the night before, and concluded that he must have. *Why else would it be so sore?* he thought.

The ready light winked suddenly and Kirk tapped the switch which would start the message playback. To say that he was surprised when the image of a female Klingon warrior appeared would have been an understatement. At the sight of the grin that slowly spread across her features, Kirk started to cringe inwardly. He listened in stunned silence to her words.

"Well, Captain Kirk, we meet at last. Let me introduce myself. My name is Kalinth, Commander of the Bird of Prey Cordos. You may not have heard of me; however I'm sure that you remember my uncle, Commander Kruge, whom I think you have met personally."

She paused to give a dramatic emphasis to her statement. "Your brutal murder of my uncle, a year ago, went unpunished both by the Federation and the Empire. I have taken it upon myself to avenge his murder, as my family will not rest until retribution has been carried out.

"No doubt you are wondering who was responsible for the attack on you last night. Well let me put your mind at rest,

for it was I. My accomplice arranged the assault on you and had you injected with a slow-acting poison, fatal unless the antidote is given within 72 hours. The effects are not very pleasant, as you will no doubt begin to realise. The drug progressively destroys the neural pathways from the brain to the vital organs of your frail Human body. You may even have started to experience some of the symptoms already."

Kalith sat back in her command chair and laughed loudly. "I am going to enjoy watching your slow painful death, Kirk, and believe me, I will be watching. The irony is that I hold the key to your continued existence."

As she continued, Kirk could see that she held a small vial in her hand. She paused and then turned to stare out at him. "If you can find me within 72 hours, Kirk, you might be able to save your puny life. If not, I will have the pleasure of watching your anguish as your time slowly runs out. Until we meet."

The message ended abruptly, and Kirk sat staring at the darkened screen, stunned. As if on cue the door chimed and opened to reveal McCoy standing in the corridor. He did not wait to be invited in.

"You have an overdue appointment, reme...." McCoy stopped midsentence as he saw the cuts and scratches on Kirk's face. Moving quickly, he came around the desk to face him.

"My God, Jim, what happened to you?" He started to inspect the scratches gently, and suddenly noticed the discolouration around the jaw that denoted a large bruise.

"You look as if you've been in a fight. Did this happen after you left us last night?"

Kirk had sat unmoving since the moment McCoy had arrived, unable even now to believe the message he had just heard.

"Jim, are you all right? What's the matter?"

Kirk silently motioned the Doctor to take a seat, and then reached out to rewind the message tape. He winced as a stab of pain caught him by surprise.

"Jim, you're in pain. Let me take a look." McCoy started to rise from where he had been seated.

Kirk waved his hand impatiently as he gasped, "Just sit there, Bones. I've got something that I need to show you."

"All right, Jim, but if you're trying to get out of a trip to Sickbay..."

"Bones... stop it," Kirk said through clenched teeth. "Just watch." He brushed a shaking hand across his forehead and was surprised to find that it was covered in perspiration.

McCoy started to say something but stopped when he saw the determined look on the Captain's face, deciding instead to seat himself and wait for Kirk to activate the vid screen for a second time.

When the message came to the end McCoy stared, as Kirk had done, at the blank screen. When he eventually brought himself to look at his friend he found himself fighting to control a sudden rush of emotion. Kirk met his gaze, the shock of the situation clearly showing in his face.

"Funny, isn't it, Bones? These past few weeks I've been trying to come to terms with my own nightmares about David and look what happens. Seems to

put things in a different context, doesn't it? There I was, worried about saving David's life, and now I've suddenly got to try and save my own."

Kirk chuckled nervously, and regretted it quickly when the sudden movement caused a sharp pain in his side. He groaned softly as he doubled over, folding his arms across his chest and resting his head on the cool surface of his desk. McCoy was instantly beside him and placed his hand gently on Kirk's shoulder.

"Come over here and lie down so I can take a look at you. I want to know what other damage was done that you decided didn't warrant my attention when you beamed up." He tried to sound angered at Kirk's lack of respect for his own health, but failed miserably.

Kirk laughed as the Doctor led him over to his sleeping area and helped him into a prone position.

"This makes any injuries I sustained in the fight seem a bit irrelevant, don't you think?"

McCoy replied lightheartedly in an effort to relieve some of Kirk's fears. "Oh, I don't know. It'll give me something to do while we work on an antidote to whatever it was that you were given." At the sight of Kirk starting to argue the Doctor continued, "And before you say anything, we *will* find an antidote, so just lie still while I take a look at you."

Kirk did as he was told, and allowed McCoy to gently probe and examine his injuries. The Captain's prolonged silence did not go unnoticed. The distant look in his eyes gave McCoy cause for concern as he realised that he could not allow Kirk too much time to brood. In his present mental state the added complication of having just been poisoned could cause

irreparable psychological damage if he could not accept the fact rationally.

He realised that he would need to talk to Spock before deciding on the best treatment for the Captain. As he looked up at Kirk lying quietly, McCoy noted with apprehension the beads of sweat on his forehead and the feverish flush to his cheeks.

"I need to get you to Sickbay, Jim. These ribs need strapping for a start, and I want to run some tests on you. Do you think you can make it on your own or shall I call for a stretcher?"

Kirk started to rise, grimacing at the pain that the movement caused. "No stretcher," he gasped.

McCoy helped him to his feet, and supported him as they slowly and silently made their way to Sickbay.

Chapter 7

Spock sat bent over his computer terminal engrossed in the readouts that were scrolling across the screen. He did not hear the door open or sense the figure that walked across the room and stood behind him.

"I thought I'd find you in here, Spock. I'm sorry if I'm interrupting something important, but I need to talk to you." McCoy sat down at the vacant terminal next to the one occupied by the First Officer.

"I take it from your presence here that it could not wait?" The Vulcan did not look away from his terminal, and gave no indication that he was willing to listen to what the Doctor had to say.

McCoy reached out and touched his

arm in an effort to attract his attention. "No, Spock, it can't wait. I need to talk to you about Jim, but before I do I'd like you to look at this tape."

Spock looked up, and silently took the message tape that McCoy offered to him. He turned it over slowly in his hand, and then raised an eyebrow in his customary manner before eventually reaching out to load it into the vidscreen nearby. McCoy squirmed inwardly at the familiar sight of the Klingon officer.

Minutes passed in silence after the message had played itself out. Spock sat thoughtfully with his fingers steeped into their familiar arch, his face as expressionless as ever save for a slight frown.

"Where is the Captain now, Doctor?"

"He's in Sickbay under sedation at the moment."

Spock gave McCoy an incredulous look. "I would not have thought that this information would have warranted such drastic action at this early stage."

McCoy shifted uneasily, hurt at Spock's accusatory tone, and decided to explain the reason for his 'drastic' action.

"Well, Spock, we have another problem that I've only recently become aware of. Jim has been suffering from a delayed reaction to the loss of his son. I thought he had coped with his grief, but apparently that wasn't the case. He's very depressed at the moment. Sleepless nights and long working hours have worn him down. I was about to try some therapy when this happened. I thought it best to sedate him, if only so that he can get a decent night's sleep."

Suddenly feeling guilty for his own

lack of action concerning Kirk's recent erratic behaviour, Spock turned to face the Doctor.

"The drug that was used - have you analyzed the compounds yet? It is imperative that we find out the makeup of the poison before we can start to formulate an antidote."

McCoy released an exasperated sigh as he said, "Yes, Spock, my lab team have done their work but I'm afraid the news isn't good." McCoy handed him a second tape. "Although some of the compounds are known to us, the majority are unheard of within the Federation. We haven't got enough time to work out a suitable antidote. The best I can do is try to slow down the progression of the poison and ease the pain that Jim will experience."

Spock sat in silence for a moment, weighing up the information that the Doctor had just given him. As if reaching a decision, he straightened in his chair and extracted the tape from the viewer.

"Very well, Doctor, it seems that our options have been somewhat reduced. However, we will work with what we have. As I understand it, the Klingon Commander has the antidote to this poison. Her message gives the impression that she is expecting us to try and find her, and the antidote, within 72 hours. We will therefore attempt to do so."

"Spock, we don't even know where to start. The message was untraceable. The Starbase defence systems haven't detected a Klingon ship anywhere near us. Just where were you thinking of starting to look?"

"Calm yourself, Doctor, if you will. You were obviously too overcome with emotion to listen to the message content properly. Firstly, the message was sent

on a localized frequency, which means that the origin is quite close by. Secondly, the fact that she indicated that an antidote was available gives us a strong indication that not only does she want to see the Captain suffer, but more importantly, I believe she wishes a final confrontation face to face. Remember, Doctor, that the Klingons take great pleasure in inflicting pain, whether mental or physical. The mere knowledge that the Captain had been given the poison would not be good enough; seeing his pain and suffering would give her the greater satisfaction, not to mention the greater honour she will receive on her return to the Empire. Remaining for the kill, even though the risk of detection was great, would be looked upon as a true act of courage."

McCoy smiled at Spock admiringly. "Spock, if you ever decide to give up command, I'd vouch for you as a fair psychologist. So what's our next step now?"

"I must go to the Bridge and try to reactivate the ship's sensors. If my suspicions are correct, the Klingon vessel is cloaked and orbiting on the far side of the planet, out of normal detector range. Will you let me know when the Captain is awake? I'd like to talk to him."

The First Officer rose from his seat, his features once again unreadable, and made his way towards the door. McCoy guessed that inwardly the Vulcan was fighting hard to control his feelings. He knew how Spock felt about Jim, the friendship they shared, and the fact that each would risk his life in order to save the other. As McCoy followed him through the door he made a mental note to keep an eye on the Vulcan in case he needed support himself.

Chapter 8

It was cold and dark. The ground trembled fiercely as another quake uprooted a nearby tree by the roots.

James Kirk was dreaming. He was back on Genesis, only this time he was standing alongside David and Saavik. A tall brusque Klingon was speaking into his communicator, and he heard the voice of Kruge give the order to execute one of the hostages. Fear gripped him at the horrible knowledge of what was about to happen. *This time*, he thought, *I can stop David from being killed. This time no-one is going to kill my son.*

The Klingon acknowledged the order and moved towards his hostages, drawing his battle knife as he approached. Kirk tried to scream a warning, to cry out, but nothing happened. He willed himself to move, to try and get between the Klingon and his son, but his body would not respond. His arms and legs were lifeless. He stared in stricken horror, powerless to act, as his enemy raised his knife and thrust it downwards into David's chest.

"NO...! OH GOD...! PLEASE, NO...!"

He awoke drenched in cold sweat and sat up suddenly. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands as he tried to stop himself from shaking. Strong arms held his shoulders firmly, and he slowly became aware of McCoy's gentle voice.

"It's all right Jim...you've just had a bad dream. You're safe in Sickbay."

Kirk did not seem to hear the Doctor's words, still caught in his waking nightmare. McCoy glanced up at the diagnostic panel above the bed, and was immediately concerned at the readings. The increased respiratory rate and raised

blood pressure confirmed that Kirk was showing signs of acute distress. He shook him gently.

"Jim, can you hear me? It's Bones, Jim."

Slowly the Doctor's reassuring words penetrated the fog of Kirk's mind and he calmed, his breathing gradually returning to as near normal as could be expected. Kirk opened his eyes warily, and met McCoy's concerned gaze.

"That's better. For a minute there you had me worried."

"Oh God, Bones, it was horrible. It was David... I just watched helplessly as they killed him. It was so real, and I couldn't do anything to help him." Kirk's voice rose hysterically as he started to shake again. McCoy eased him back onto the pillow, and then reached for the button that would summon the nurse.

"Take it easy, Jim. It's over. Just try to relax."

Kirk closed his eyes as he tried to drive the vivid scenes from his memory. He was dimly aware of McCoy talking to the nurse who had entered the room, but could not hear what was being said. As his composure returned he tried to rise once again from the bed. The stiffness that he felt in his side made him remember the real reason for his presence in Sickbay, and he lay back down, heavily.

The sudden movement alerted McCoy, and he came back to stand at Kirk's side. "Jim, are you all right now?"

"Yes, Bones. I'm sorry about what happened. I just don't seem to be able to forgive myself for..."

"Jim, listen to me. I told you before,

you've got to overcome your guilt. I'll help you, but it will take time."

McCoy looked up as the nurse returned with a loaded hypo. Kirk eyed it suspiciously as the Doctor prepared to administer the shot. He started to rise onto his elbows.

"What's that for, Bones? I don't need anything, honest - I'm okay."

"I'll be the judge of that, Captain." McCoy replied sternly. "Don't worry, it won't make you sleep. I just want to make sure you're nice and relaxed. Now be a good boy and lie back down."

McCoy knew that Spock would want to speak with Kirk as soon as he knew that he was awake. The relaxant was a precaution to ensure that the Vulcan's questions did not upset him any more than necessary. Satisfied that the drug was taking effect, McCoy said, "Jim, do you feel up to a visitor? Spock wants to talk to you."

Kirk looked at the Doctor, the unasked question apparent in the expression on his face.

"Yes, he knows, Jim. I showed Spock the message tape and he has come up with a theory about the Klingon ship. I'll call him and let him explain." McCoy moved towards the intercom.

"McCoy to Bridge."

"Spock here, Doctor. What can I do for you?"

"The Captain would like to see you in Sickbay right away." McCoy did not want to arouse suspicion amongst the rest of the Bridge crew concerning the Captain's welfare and he hoped that Spock would understand the cryptic message.

The First Officer's reply was almost immediate. "I'll be right there. Spock out."

Kirk watched the Doctor as he returned to his side, and eased himself up into a sitting position with a groan. "Bones, what's going to happen to me?"

McCoy checked the diagnostic readouts with a glance, and then hoisted himself up onto the edge of the bed.

"Well, the Klingons weren't bluffing about the toxicity of the poison. I ran a few tests on some blood samples, and there are definitely substances present in your bloodstream that shouldn't be there. I've fed the results through the lab computers but so far they've been unable to identify the poison. I can't even start to formulate an antidote until I know what I'm dealing with."

McCoy looked away from Kirk's pleading hazel eyes, unable to hold his gaze, at the same time fighting a losing battle with his own emotions.

"How long, Bones... before...?"

"Don't even say it, Jim, because it's not going to come to that!" McCoy snapped, more harshly than he had meant to. He wished Spock would hurry up before his composure failed him altogether.

"I've learned enough from the tests I ran to be able to concoct a serum that will slow down the progress of the poison. You'll need a shot every two hours until..."

The Doctor stopped, unable to finish the sentence. At the look in his friend's eyes, Kirk reached out a hand and placed it over McCoy's. They had been together for a long time and Kirk realised that Bones would be going through his

own particular brand of suffering.

"It's okay, Bones, don't worry. I'm not finished yet, not by a long shot."

Before McCoy could answer the doors to Sickbay opened and Spock entered. He moved swiftly to stand on the opposite side of the bed to the Doctor. When Kirk saw him, he started to rise still further from his bed, and winced as the movement caused a sharp pain in his side. McCoy pushed him gently back on to his pillows.

"Oh no you don't. I agreed to let Spock see you on the condition that you were not to move from this bed. Now if you don't lie still, I'll strap you down."

"Bones, you fuss too much. I feel fine."

"You may *feel* fine, but you're far from *being* fine. Apart from the apparent injuries, the poison is going to slowly debilitate your autonomic nervous system and..."

"Doctor, please. Time is of the essence."

"I'm sorry, Spock, go ahead. I'll be in my office if you need me... Oh and Spock - ten minutes only."

Spock nodded and turned towards the Captain as the Doctor left.

"Well, Spock, it's good to see you. McCoy tells me that you have a theory about the Klingon ship."

Spock pulled up a chair and sat down sedately. "Indeed, Captain, but it is no longer just a theory. I have confirmed the presence of a Klingon Bird of Prey orbiting on the far side of the planet."

Kirk raised both his eyebrows in

utter amazement. "How did they manage to evade detection by the base sensors? The defence system should have been alerted long before they reached orbiting status."

"Yes, that had me slightly puzzled for a while too. However, I believe that they were able to calculate the scanning area of our sensors and discovered a 'blind spot'. With their cloaking device activated they would have been able to attain orbit undetected. Once there, Kalinith or any of her crew would have been able to come and go as they please, as long as they were able to remain undetected by Federation personnel. Having gone to so much trouble to get here, I do not think that they would have risked being seen at the base. For this reason, I would surmise that she engaged the aid of a few non-Klingon accomplices."

Kirk was silent for a moment, angered at the ease with which the Klingons seemed to have been able to penetrate Federation space. "Have you notified Starfleet Command yet? They will need to be informed as soon as possible."

"The Base Administrator has been informed, and he will send a priority message to Command. However, I am not optimistic. The closest Starship to us is the Hood and she is 5 days away."

"Spock, I don't have 5 days," Kirk responded, grabbing his First Officer's arm to emphasise the fact.

"I know, Jim. That is why I have started to put my own plan into effect." The Vulcan looked uneasy as he started to explain his actions. "Lieutenant-Commander Uhura contacted the Bird of Prey at my request. The crew seemed very surprised to find out that they had been detected, and when we demanded to

speak to their Commander, we were told that neither she nor her First in Command were available. It appears that they both left the ship unannounced, leaving a very inexperienced crew behind. It was a simple matter to persuade them that it would be in their best interests to leave orbit immediately and return to Klingon space, or prepare to surrender to the incoming Starship."

A boyish grin spread across the Captain's face. "Spock, you lied."

The Vulcan feigned a hurt expression as he replied indignantly. "I prefer to think of it as a distortion of the truth. I just didn't reveal the amount of time that they had in which to leave. It did, however, have the desired effect. The Bird of Prey has returned to Klingon space leaving Kalinith and her accomplice somewhere on the planet. Our next task is to find out where they are hiding, and for that I need your assistance, Jim."

Kirk noted the use of his Christian name and looked at Spock in surprise. He detected the sudden stiffness in his posture and tried to reassure him.

"Spock, what's the matter? You know I'll help you in any way that I can. I've been over and over the night of the attack, but I can't remember anything other than what I've already told Bones."

Spock shifted uncomfortably. "Jim, I need to use the mindmeld. You know I would not ask unless it was absolutely necessary, but I must know whether your subconscious has retained the impressions of your attackers. I already know the identity of Kalinith, but if we are to stand any chance of finding them on the planet I need to know the identity of the others involved."

Kirk knew that Spock felt uncomfortable every time he used the

mindmeld, as he felt that it was an invasion of one's own privacy.

"Spock, there's no need to explain, you know that you have my permission whenever you need it."

"Permission for what, Spock? Have I missed anything important?"

McCoy had returned without being noticed by either of his friends. Spock spoke quietly to Kirk. "If you will excuse us a minute?"

He beckoned for McCoy to join him on the opposite side of the room, out of hearing range of the Captain, and explained quickly what he intended to do.

"Spock, I'm not sure that Jim is up to this. You're going to bring feelings and events to the surface that he has been trying to suppress for the past few weeks. He is already very vulnerable."

"I know, Doctor, that is why I require your presence when I attempt to meld. I will help him control his thoughts during the link but he may need your assistance once I have withdrawn." At the look in McCoy's eyes Spock added quickly, "I would not risk it if we had another option."

McCoy thought for a moment. "Okay, Spock, just wait a minute while I get something from my office."

He returned shortly fumbling with a hypo. He nodded at Spock, and together they rejoined Kirk at his bedside. The Captain's eyes were closed and McCoy touched his shoulder to rouse him.

Kirk looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry, I must have dozed off." He turned to McCoy. "I assume Spock has told you about attempting a mindmeld?"

Kirk looked at the Doctor as he nodded, trying to read the expression on his face.

"Well then, Mr Spock, shall we get started?"

Spock moved to sit at Kirk's side, whilst the Doctor moved around to monitor the diagnostic panel. The Captain closed his eyes and tried to relax as Spock expertly sought the path into the depths of his mind. He was aware of the Vulcan's mind gently passing through the levels of his subconscious, searching for the memories he required.

He saw David as he had been when he first met him on Regulus. *My son*, he thought. Then he was holding him in his arms after Spock's death. He could hear him say "...and I'm proud to be your son..."

Another memory. This time he was kneeling beside the still body on the surface of Genesis, David's face so calm and peaceful. Tears filled Kirk's eyes as he began to cry. "No, not my son. Please God, no."

He was on Vulcan standing in front of Spock. "Jim..." Spock whispered, "Your name is... Jim?"

"I have been and always shall be your friend..."

"Yes, Spock, that's right."

Scenes flashed past as Spock inadvertently forced him to relive his memories as he desperately searched for what he was after.

Suddenly he was in the botanical gardens, walking slowly along the quiet dark pathway.

Kirk tensed instinctively as the

familiar voice called his name. The night of the attack was happening all over again. He cried out helplessly, willing Spock to withdraw.

"Please, Spock... I... can't..."

Kirk was on the ground, his assailant holding him down. He felt the stab of pain as the poison was injected into his arm.

"No. No more, please leave me alone."

He was dimly aware of Spock's calm supportive voice deep inside his mind.

It's all right, Jim. I can help you. Do not fear, I am with you. I will not allow any harm to come to you.

Please, Spock, no more. I'm tired.

Kirk fought to close down his side of the link and was vaguely aware of Spock's consciousness withdrawing slowly, carefully, as he fought back the tears that stung his face.

He opened his eyes, to find Spock being supported by McCoy as he guided the Vulcan over to the next bed.

"Spock... I'm sorry... Bones, is he all right? Did I hurt him?"

The Doctor settled the First Officer onto the bed and turned to Kirk. "He'll be all right, Jim, he's just exhausted. The emotional strain of the meld has worn him out but he'll be as good as new after a rest."

As he returned to Kirk's side he glanced at the diagnostic panel and then retrieved the hypo that he had brought from his office. "How are you coping, Jim?"

Kirk laughed softly. "I don't know, Bones. I feel as if I'm losing control." He slammed his fist down on the side of the bed in frustration. "What's the matter with me? I've dealt with situations similar to this before, why can't I deal with this now?"

He felt a pressure on his arm, and turned to see McCoy administer a shot. Before he could protest he felt his body start to relax, and he found it increasingly difficult to keep his eyes open. Reaching out he caught McCoy's wrist.

"Bones... please... don't leave me... I don't want to sleep... to dream... I can't..."

McCoy held the hand that circled his wrist and replied in a firm but reassuring voice, "Jim, listen to me. I won't leave you alone. When you wake up I'll still be here. Now relax and close your eyes."

The Doctor used his free hand and passed it across Kirk's features, forcing him to close his eyelids, and after a few moments the Captain's breathing slowed as he fell into a restful sleep. Satisfied that both of his patients would sleep for at least eight hours, McCoy moved into his adjoining office. He desperately needed to be alone and have time to compose himself.

Chapter 9

Murphy laughed as he produced yet another winning hand of poker.

"That's the sixth straight win for you. If I find out that you've been cheatin' on me, I'll slit your throat for you!" Baxter, his partner, threw down the cards in disgust and rose from the table.

"How about you two joining us in a

hand, or don't you have such sophisticated games where you come from?" Baxter looked at his friend and laughed, both of them sharing a private joke.

Kalinh eyed the unshaven form of the Human called Murphy with distaste. As she sat in the darkened cellar she found herself wondering, not for the first time, at the type of people that Humans were. Kreen had done his work well. She had asked him to find a couple of suitable volunteers who looked likely to do the dirty deed, and pay them a hefty sum for their services. The callousness with which they had accepted the job, and more importantly the money, had surprised her at first. After all Humans, by nature, were supposed to be emotional, placing a high value on life. They had not asked any questions nor seemed remotely concerned with the fact that they would cause the eventual death of a fellow man. No, the money was all that seemed to concern them.

"What are you looking at, Klingon? Don't you like the living arrangements?" Murphy laughed as he shoved back his chair and moved towards the door. "Well, I don't like the company much myself either." Turning to his partner he continued, "Are you coming for a drink, Baxter? The air in here has suddenly gone very stale."

Baxter joined his friend at the door. He turned to sneer back at their house guests. "We'll bring you back something to eat.... maybe."

They left the room, laughing, and closed the door heavily behind them. Kreen rose stiffly, muttering a Klingon curse under his breath.

"How much longer do we have to put up with their insolence?" Turning, he looked accusingly at his commanding

officer. "No disrespect to you Commander, but I did not know that we would be sharing living accommodation with these animals. If I had, perhaps I would have been more choosy."

Kalinh sighed. "Kreen, you know as well as I do that we have to remain undetected for as long as possible. I agree that these aren't the most suitable arrangements, but they will have to do. It's not going to be for much longer."

Kalinh's gaze moved around the room as she surveyed their surroundings. The cellar was no more than a small store. The windowless room was illuminated by one small light source suspended from the ceiling. Apart from the table and chairs that Murphy and Baxter had occupied earlier, the only furniture in the room was some storage crates stacked against the far wall. Murphy had brought them here when they had told him that they needed a place to hide for a few days. The sounds of raucous laughter and jeering had not stopped since their arrival. With the smell of stale beer hanging in the air, the two Klingons surmised that they were in the beer cellar of one of the many drinking establishments within the Starbase Mall Complex.

Initially, Kalinh had been pleased with this revelation and turn of luck. It had meant that they would not be far from the recreational complex and the holo facilities, and she would need the use of the latter very soon.

She had earlier learned of the fact that her ship had left orbit and could only surmise that it had been detected by the Federation. She had known of the risks from the start, and had been willing to take them. However, Kalinh did not know how far Kreen's loyalty would stretch, and had made the decision not to tell him of their ship's sudden departure.

She smiled as she thought, *After all, he has a vital role to play yet.*

She closed her eyes and rested, waiting for the return of Murphy and Baxter, suddenly realising that she was hungry.

Before too long the cellar door reopened, bathing the room in yellow light. Somewhat worse for drink, Murphy staggered into the room and crossed to the table. He sank heavily into his chair and tossed a package towards Kreen.

"Here - I didn't know what you people eat so I hope you like burgers?" He burped loudly as he uncorked a bottle that he had been carrying.

Kreen took the package and unwrapped the contents curiously. He took one portion of the peculiar shaped 'burger' and handed it to Kalinh, who took it eagerly. She looked across at the drunken form of Murphy, who was pleasantly enjoying his bottle of brew, and bit into the meat. Slightly surprised at the strange but palatable taste, she chewed slowly, motioning Kreen to do likewise.

When Kalinh had finished swallowing the last mouthful she looked towards the drunken form of Murphy, who sat slumped in a semi-conscious stupor. "We have need of your help again, Human."

Murphy spluttered as he choked on the mouthful of beer that he had just taken. He wiped his dirty sleeve across his face and grinned at Kalinh. "Anything I do from now on comes extra."

"You will of course be rewarded for your services." She looked towards Kreen, who nodded that he understood.

"I am in need of a security pass that will allow me access to the recreational complex, specifically the holographic facilities. I wouldn't have thought that it would be difficult for you to obtain one. After all, the complex is open for general use."

Murphy snorted as if he had found something amusing in Kalinth's request. "Now what would you want with a pass to the holohalls? Thinking of living out a Klingon fantasy?"

Kalinh ignored the cynical remark and snapped back, "Knowledge can be dangerous, Murphy. The less you know the longer your life expectancy will be."

The Human rose unsteadily from his seat and turned angrily towards Kalinh. "Don't threaten me, Klingon. One word from either of us and your little game, whatever it might be, will be over. I'll get you the pass but I warn you now, it won't be cheap."

Moving around the table, he strode towards the door and was gone, leaving Kalinh to explain the intricacies of her plan to Kreen.

Chapter 10

"Doctor McCoy "

The touch of a hand on his shoulder brought McCoy back to reality. He cleared the foggy remains of sleep from his brain and rose stiffly from the seat where he had fallen asleep, to find Spock standing over him.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't want to disturb you but I need to talk."

McCoy moved from behind his desk, shaking his head as he walked to

the servitor in his office. "No, that's all right, Spock, I've got work to do anyway. I must have dozed off or something. Do you want some coffee?"

The First Officer noticed the empty glass on McCoy's desk, but decided not to remark on the fact that intoxication might have had something to do with his state. "No thank you, Doctor, but you go ahead."

McCoy nodded and ordered himself a hot cup of sugared coffee, deciding that he needed something sweet to take the bad taste out of his mouth.

"What did you want to talk about, Spock? The mindmeld, or is there something else bothering you?"

Spock sat forward in his chair and frowned slightly. "I'm afraid that the meld with the Captain did not prove as conclusive as I had hoped. Although I was able to uncover some images, the identities of the assailants still remain vague. All I have been able to ascertain is the fact that they were both Human, which bears out my theory that Kalinh enlisted the aid of some accomplices in order to keep her own identity and location a secret."

"Well, that's that then, isn't it? If we don't know who we're looking for, how are we going to start searching? Spock, we can't just sit here and do nothing."

"Calm yourself, Doctor. If you will let me continue, you will see that I have no intention of sitting back and doing nothing, as you so quaintly put it."

McCoy reprimanded himself for being so curt. "I'm sorry, Spock. I'm still angry about this whole mess. Go ahead." He emptied his coffee cup and sat back in his chair, deliberately willing himself to relax.

"Are you two holding a staff meeting without inviting me?"

Both Spock and McCoy turned as one at the sound from the door. Kirk was standing in the entrance, leaning heavily against the door frame for support. Although he tried to smile with all of his usual charm, McCoy could see the underlying strain in his features. As he started to move slowly into the room the Doctor rose from his chair and came to his side. Kirk allowed himself to be guided towards a vacant chair, grateful for the offered support, and sat down heavily, cursing his own weakness.

McCoy reached for his mediscanner and passed it hurriedly across Kirk's upper body. He took a quick look at the readings and said, "Jim, you shouldn't even be up out of bed. You need rest so that your ribs can heal. The medication will slow down the advance of the poison, but that's no reason for you to pretend that nothing's wrong."

"Bones, please. I know what I'm doing. I feel helpless lying in there, and it gives me too much time to think. I need something to keep me occupied. Don't worry, I'll take it easy, but please don't shut me out. I want to help."

Spock and McCoy exchanged worried glances, and finally the Doctor turned to face Kirk.

"All right, Jim, have it your own way. But the minute I think that you're showing signs of fatigue, I'll have you back in that bed so fast you won't know what's hit you... and no arguments."

Kirk sighed, but nodded in agreement with McCoy's wishes, knowing deep down that the Doctor was right.

The room suddenly swam as his

vision blurred. In an attempt to distract his two friends from his plight he rose and moved towards the servitor to get himself a cup of coffee. He shook his head to clear the muzzy feeling and said, "Okay, Spock. You were about to explain our next move."

After satisfying himself that Kirk was not about to collapse on the floor, Spock continued.

"As I was just telling Doctor McCoy, the meld was inconclusive. The images that I was able to extract from your mind were vague and indeterminate. They were Human without a doubt, but as to their identity... I'm afraid that remains a mystery."

"So what happens now?" Kirk visibly paled as he came and sat on the edge of McCoy's desk.

Spock steepled his fingers as he continued. "We know that the Klingons are hiding on the surface, probably within the base perimeter itself. I would presume that whoever Kalinth employed to help her has also supplied them with a place where they can remain unobserved. If I can locate the hideout we will also know the location of the Klingon, and hence the antidote."

"But Spock, you've already implied that there is no way of finding the hideout if we don't know the identities of Jim's assailants." McCoy looked exasperated, wondering where Spock's hypothesis was leading. If Kirk didn't know better he would have mistaken Spock's sigh as a show of frustration at the interruption.

"I believe, Doctor, that I have found a way of solving that particular problem. Unfortunately, with the Enterprise undergoing diagnostic checks at present, I am unable to make use of the ship's sensors, and our portable tricorders are

unable to sense specific lifeforms..."

McCoy could contain himself no longer. Slamming the side of his chair angrily he rose from his chair to stand in front of the Vulcan. "Spock, where is all this leading?"

"Bones." Kirk motioned the Doctor to silence and the effort caused a spasm of coughing. As McCoy started to move towards him he said, "It's all right. I'm okay, let Spock continue."

McCoy raised his arms in surrender, and returned to his seat.

"Thank you, Captain. Now as I was saying, I propose to take one of the portable medical scanners and modify the frequency to enable us to scan specifically for Klingon lifesigns."

Kirk moved uncomfortably where he sat perched on McCoy's desk. Brushing the perspiration from his forehead, he looked at Spock questioningly. "How long will that take, Spock?"

"I will need approximately 12 hours in which to complete the modification. It is a very complex operation and needs to be done with precision. If I was to take any less time, I could not guarantee the results."

"No, I suppose not, Spock." Kirk looked thoughtful for a while and then stood, coming to a decision of his own. "Well, Mr Spock, while you're busy working on the scanner I'll do some investigating of my own."

"Now just hold on one damn minute. You're not going anywhere... except back to bed."

Kirk walked slowly and deliberately to stand in front of McCoy. "Bones, just

hear me out. What I have in mind will only require you to let me return to my quarters. In order to give us another option, I'm going to request the computer to search through the visitor records from the base. Anyone using the facilities is required to produce some form of identification, and their arrival is logged by the base computers. I know it's a slim chance, especially since I didn't get a decent look at the assailants, but if I can identify either of them from their ID's, it will give us an alternative. And it beats lying around here just waiting for something to happen."

As McCoy started to protest, Kirk added quickly, "Bones, I've got to try. It's my life..."

At the look in Kirk's pleading eyes the Doctor softened his tone as he placed his hand on his shoulder. "Okay, Jim, I'll agree to release you to your quarters, but nowhere else, understand? No sneaking off to the Bridge. You still need to get a shot every two hours and I don't want to have to chase all over the ship looking for you. Now just sit down before you fall down, while I go and get the serum. You're due a shot about now."

Kirk nodded and McCoy moved to retrieve the hypo and a capsule of the serum he had manufactured. When he returned, he was surprised to find Kirk still standing where he had left him. As he looked at Jim, he noted with concern the paleness of his face and the glazed expression in his eyes.

"Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk's breathing had become quick and laboured. "Bones, I don't feel so good at the moment. I think I'm going to..."

McCoy grabbed him quickly as he swayed, and shouted over his shoulder.

"Spock, help me get him into that chair."

Even as McCoy spoke the Vulcan had taken Kirk's other arm, and was helping the Doctor guide him to the nearest chair. McCoy used his mediscanner quickly, and scrutinized the readings, not liking what they indicated. Kirk was leaning forward against Spock's supportive arms and seemed to be having considerable difficulty with his breathing.

"Doctor, what is the matter?"

"He's going into respiratory arrest, Spock. Hold onto him while I get a dose of Tri-Ox. It'll help him produce more oxygen and also slow down his respiratory rate to relieve some of the strain on his lungs."

Spock held onto Kirk as the Doctor rushed out into the main ward. The Captain gasped and clutched at his chest. Through clenched teeth he cried, "Can't breath, Spock - help me, please..."

The Vulcan increased his supportive grip on Kirk's shoulders as he started to pitch forward.

"Captain... Jim, hold on, McCoy will not be long."

McCoy returned at a run and administered the shot. "Okay, Spock, let's get him onto the couch. The shot will need a while to take effect and he'll find it easier to breath lying down."

Together they carried Kirk to the couch reserved for such times when McCoy needed to be on call, and laid him down gently. Already the Captain's breathing had become less laboured, and his features had started to relax. Using the mediscanner for a second time, the Doctor confirmed that Kirk's respiratory rate was slowly returning to normal.

As Kirk felt his vigour return he started to rise, and found himself forced back down gently by his two friends.

"Lie still for a while, Jim. Give yourself time to recover," McCoy said gently.

Kirk raised himself painfully onto his elbows. "Bones, we... I don't have a lot of time."

In frustration McCoy lashed out. "My God, Jim, you're determined to kill yourself before that poison has a chance to! Listen to me - until we find an antidote you may experience more attacks like the one you just had. Only next time I might not be there for you."

Kirk looked back at the Doctor and saw the concern that was written all over his face. He swung his legs from the couch and sat waiting for a wave of dizziness to pass. He smiled up at McCoy. "In that case, Bones, I'll make it an order that you keep an eye on me."

McCoy stared tightlipped at Kirk for a while and then stepped back, allowing Kirk to rise. "It wouldn't matter what I said, would it? You'd still go ahead and do whatever you wanted, regardless of the consequences."

The Doctor was hurt and annoyed at Kirk's flagrant attitude. Kirk knew this and tried to comfort him.

"Bones, I know you think that I'm flirting with death, but I'm not, I assure you. We've got 72 hours, less now, in which to find Kalinith and the antidote. I... we honestly can't afford to waste any time. None of us can. If it makes you feel any better, why don't you come with me to my quarters and help me?" He smiled again. "I could do with someone to talk to."

The Doctor shifted his gaze, embarrassed that Kirk had read him so accurately. "All right, I will. I'll arrange for M'Benga to relieve me here and I'll follow you down shortly."

Kirk patted McCoy on the shoulder. "Good, I'll see you later. Mr Spock, I would appreciate it if you would keep me informed of your progress. Oh, and one more thing, gentlemen. Up until now no one but yourselves is aware of what has happened to me. I'd like to keep it that way for as long as possible. As far as the rest of the crew are concerned I'm still on shore leave, understood?"

McCoy and Spock exchanged glances once again and then nodded. "Understood, Captain."

Having said everything that needed to be said, Kirk nodded and then headed for the exit. There was a lot to be done, and the sooner he made a start, the better it would be for everyone.

Chapter 11

Several hours later in the middle of the ship's night Kirk sat slumped over his desk, his head resting on his arms. Although his eyes were closed, he was far from being asleep.

Since leaving Sickbay that afternoon he had contacted the Base Administrator's office and requested that the Enterprise be granted permission to access the records for those personnel who were currently registered as being visitors to the base. His request went unquestioned, his rank and the fact that he was in command of a Federation Starship being sufficient justification.

A computer link had been set up soon after, and Kirk had started the

arduous and perhaps futile task of scanning each individual record in the hope of recognising one or both of his assailants. McCoy, true to his word, had arrived within an hour of their meeting in Sickbay, and had tried to keep Kirk company without making his deep concern for the Captain's well-being too evident. They had spent the afternoon and early evening hard at work searching through the records, discarding them one after the other. When Kirk had started to show signs of fatigue the Doctor had insisted that he break off from his work and had told him to get some rest. The next few hours had been spent with the two of them engaged in idle chat, McCoy's efforts purely to try and revive Kirk's failing morale. The Doctor had finally left with the threat that he would return during the night to check on him, as well as to administer his medication.

Kirk opened his eyes and stared blankly at the darkened computer terminal. As tired as he was, he could not go to sleep no matter how hard he tried. He had dismissed the idea of calling McCoy and asking him to prescribe something. He could just imagine the Doctor's reaction as he lectured him on the fact that he should still be in Sickbay. He shifted his gaze slightly to look at the chronometer, and noted that it was nearly time for McCoy to pay him another visit. Kirk sighed heavily, and then reached out to turn the computer terminal on. He recalled the data file that he had been scanning earlier. With fatigue dulling his senses, Kirk absently scanned the records as they appeared on the screen, desperately searching for any signs that might allow him to recognise his mystery assailants. For over an hour he stared at the screen, his eyes stinging from the strain and his head throbbing incessantly with the start of a headache.

As the next record flashed on to the screen Kirk sighed heavily and reached

out to switch the terminal off. With his finger poised on the off button, he stopped suddenly. There was something familiar about the face of the man who was displayed on the screen. He viewed it carefully, and realised that he had seen this person before. He remembered staring into those same dark emotionless eyes the night that he had been attacked.

"That's him," he said quietly to himself. He requested a hardcopy of the record, and sat back tiredly in his chair as he read the personal details. According to the data the man's name was Murphy, Sean Murphy. He was listed as a freighter pilot, and was a self employed salvage merchant. He had served time in a rehabilitation colony seven years earlier, after he had been found guilty of theft with violence and mugging. Not a nice character to know, Kirk thought. The file also showed that Murphy did not care with whom he did business, as it detailed the fact that he had been caught helping an Orion pirate ship smuggle a Federation derelict to one of their homeworlds. Klingons and Romulans also seemed to be amongst his customers.

As Kirk finished reading the profile he concluded that Murphy was the type of person who would consider undertaking any manner of work, as long as the price was right. A muted beep indicated that the hardcopy was ready, and Kirk moved to retrieve it from the printer. As he did so a sharp pain in his chest caused him to double over and cry out in agony. His vision blurred as he slumped to the floor, arms folded tight across his abdomen. The pain gradually subsided, leaving him breathless and totally drained. As if from a distance, he heard the chime of the door signal, but he could not reach out to depress the intercom button, any movement causing fresh agonies to course through his body.

Outside in the corridor McCoy

pushed the door signal a second time, concern mounting at the lack of response from Kirk. Perhaps he was asleep, he thought, but he knew that Jim would have woken at the second signal. He pressed the intercom button.

"Jim, it's me, McCoy. Are you awake?"

No answer. Cursing to himself, McCoy quickly used his override code. Once the door was open he stepped into Kirk's quarters anxiously. At first he did not see anyone and turned angrily, thinking that Kirk had disobeyed his orders and had gone to the Bridge. Suddenly he heard movement from the area around the desk and when he looked closer he caught sight of Kirk's white command shirt. His heart missed a beat as he reached the work area in two giant strides.

He found Kirk lying curled up on the floor between the cabin wall and a cabinet. From the expression on his face McCoy could tell that he was in great pain. Sweat beaded on his forehead and neck and his facial muscles were taut from the effort of controlling the pain.

McCoy knelt down quickly beside Kirk, and rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Take it easy, Jim. Just try to relax."

Kirk tried to turn towards the sound of McCoy's voice. "Bones, is that you?"

"Yes, Jim; now lie still and don't try to move."

"The pain, Bones... it hurts.... oh my God..." Kirk groaned through clenched teeth and tried to pull himself into a tight ball.

McCoy moved to hold him until the

wave of pain subsided. "It's okay, Jim, just hold on." The Doctor fumbled in his medikit until he found his scanner and ran it quickly over Kirk's form. He checked the readings and then adjusted a hypospray in order to give Kirk a shot of muscle relaxant. Almost immediately the Captain's body relaxed and became quite still. McCoy lifted one of Kirk's eyelids to check whether he was unconscious and sat back, satisfied, when he realized that Kirk was just suffering from exhaustion after his ordeal.

Several minutes passed before Kirk opened his eyes and looked up at McCoy. He exhaled slowly, a tired smile playing across his face, and said, "Thanks, Bones... for everything."

Hiding his immense relief, McCoy grunted disgustedly. "None of this would have happened if you had done as you were told and stayed in Sickbay."

From where he lay on the floor Kirk replied weakly, "Bones, we've already been through that argument before."

"I know, I know... Come on, let's get you out of this corner and into bed."

"Bones, I'm...."

"No arguments this time, Jim. You need sleep badly, and I need to check you over more thoroughly."

Kirk remained silent, knowing that McCoy would not allow him to win this particular argument. He permitted the Doctor to help him unsteadily to his feet and guide him towards the sleeping area. McCoy was not encouraged by the fact that Kirk seemed to rely solely on his support, only now appreciating just how much the last attack had taken out of him. He eased him slowly down onto his bed.

"Now just lie still and rest while I

take a better look at you."

To McCoy's satisfaction, Kirk did as he was told. He spent the time thinking about his earlier discovery, and wondered whether he should tell McCoy and Spock about Murphy. Bones would probably confine him to Sickbay and go off in search of the freighter pilot himself, and he wasn't about to allow McCoy to risk his life for him. If Spock went, then his work with the scanner would be delayed and he too would be putting his own life at risk.

Suddenly Kirk made his decision. The only plausible course of action was for him to go alone. He could search for Murphy on the planet without distracting Spock or McCoy from their work. If he was unsuccessful, they would still have their original plan to fall back on.

McCoy's voice suddenly broke his train of thought. "Well, all things considered you're doing just fine, although I still think you should be in Sickbay."

Kirk opened his mouth to say something, but McCoy silenced him. "Oh I know, we've been through this already. I must need my head examined for even agreeing to it."

Kirk grinned as he started to rise onto one elbow. "Bones, you know that I would agree with you normally, but time is not on our side." Tentatively touching his mid section he added, "God, I feel like I've been walked over by an army of elephants. What happened?"

McCoy nodded. "I was afraid something like this would happen. The poison in your bloodstream is attacking the various nerve centres which control muscular movement, resulting in spasmodic muscle failure. The serum is designed to counteract the effect, but your

body is starting to build up an immunity, which is resulting in the seizures that you have been experiencing. I'm going to try and give you a muscle relaxant as well as the serum, in the hope that together they will reduce the seizures to a tolerable level. Unfortunately they will make you feel constantly drowsy, which maybe won't be such a bad thing as it will ensure that you rest."

McCoy looked away from Kirk's gaze and fumbled for a hypodermic. Kirk knew that the Doctor would be torturing himself with feelings of inadequacy and guilt at not being able to do more. He reached out painfully and touched McCoy's arm.

"Bones, it's not your fault. Don't keep blaming yourself for what's happened. If you want someone to direct your anger at, then wait until we find the Klingons."

McCoy turned back to face Jim, his eyes moist with unshed tears. "Did I ever tell you that you have a great bedside manner?"

Kirk smiled tiredly. "I had a good teacher." He eyed the hypo that McCoy was holding with suspicion. "What's that for? I'm feeling better already, so you don't have to..."

"Just hold on a minute. You're due another dose of serum, and I told you that you needed to get some sleep, or had you forgotten?"

Without waiting for Kirk to argue, McCoy placed the hypo against his arm and administered the shot. In Kirk's present state of exhaustion the relaxant that the Doctor had included in the hypo had an immediate effect. Before Kirk had a chance to voice his protests, he felt his body succumb, and was only dimly aware of McCoy helping him back into a

prone position before sleep finally claimed him.

Satisfied that Kirk would sleep for a good eight hours, the Doctor collected his medical equipment and let himself out of the Captain's quarters. He realized that he had been on duty himself for the past twelve hours without a break, and decided to take some of his own advice and grab a few hours of sleep before Kirk was due his next dose of medication.

Kirk awoke and checked his chronometer to see how much time he had before McCoy was due to pay him another visit; not long - he needed to work fast. He rose painfully from the bed and moved over to his desk. He set his vidscreen to record and sat back to tape a message for Spock and McCoy. In the event that things did not turn out according to plan he wanted to let his two closest friends know why he had decided on the action that he was about to take; it was their right to know.

When he had finished, he moved to his wardrobe and found some suitable clothes that would enable him to mingle in the various bars and clubs at the Starbase. He put them to one side and tucked a photograph of Murphy into a breast pocket of the jacket. With this done, he moved back to his bed, and sat to wait for McCoy.

Chapter 12

It was deep into the night at Starbase Eleven. In their cellar hideout Kalinith and Kreen both lay awake listening to the sounds from the bar as they filtered down from the room above. They had been holed up in the cellar for nearly three days, never once straying

from their self-imposed prison. Kalinth longed for the smell of fresh air and daylight on her face, and wished, not for the first time, that her mission would soon be over and the debt to her family paid.

She had decided that they must soon move to implement the next stage of her plan. She withdrew the rec-pass that Murphy had given her earlier, and double-checked the details. It would be foolish to allow herself to be caught at this late stage, she thought. Satisfied that the pass was in order, she replaced it in a concealed pocket of her uniform.

Kalinth mentally reviewed her plan, trying to find weaknesses in her own strategy, until eventually she became satisfied that it was foolproof. Kreen, for his part, had been very patient. Kalinth was very pleased with his performance so far, and regretted the fact that he might have to be killed in order for her plan to succeed. She vowed that he would be remembered and honoured for giving his life in the pursuit of justice, and honour for the Empire.

Kalinth waited patiently for the noise and commotion from the bar to fade, and then leaned across and shook Kreen.

"Wake up, Kreen. It is nearly time to leave this place, and I need to talk to you about a small matter."

Kreen woke slowly and pulled himself into a sitting position.

"Where are we going? Back to the ship?"

Kalinth did not answer his question, deciding that she still needed to keep the fate of their ship a secret from him. "It's time for me to put the final stage of my plan into effect, but first we must discuss

the fate of Murphy and Baxter."

Kreen was still trying to wake up fully and did not understand what his Commander was saying. "I do not understand, Commander. Do we need to employ them further?"

Kalinth was patient with him. She knew that his role in her strategy was crucial, and he needed to be fully aware of his own importance. If Kreen was as loyal to her as she believed, he would carry out her wishes without any questions.

"No, Kreen, that is my point. We do not need their services any longer. They have outlived their usefulness and it is now time to dispose of them."

Kreen looked up, startled. "Is that absolutely necessary?" He had not enjoyed sharing the cellar with the two Humans, and at times he had felt like killing them there and then, but Kalinth's statement still shocked him.

"Yes, Kreen, it is necessary. We cannot afford to leave any loose ends or anybody who can identify us. I will leave you to decide how to dispose of them, but be advised that it would be best to make it look like an accident." Kalinth emphasised her last words, knowing that it was important that Kreen understood exactly what was required.

"Very well, Commander, I will obey your wishes. When do you want me to act?"

"Tomorrow evening after I have left for the rec centre. When you have disposed of the bodies you will join me there, in the holo hall. There shouldn't be anybody around at that time of night but be careful that you are not seen and followed. By now I'm sure that the Enterprise will have sent personnel down

to the Base to start their own investigations, so stealth is of the utmost importance."

Kreen nodded in agreement, and with everything said that needed to be said they both sat back to await the coming morning.

Kirk materialized in a secluded spot within the botanical gardens. Dressed in a light brown pair of trousers and matching jacket, he looked like any other visitor out for a day's shopping in the complex. He touched the breast pocket and assured himself that he still had the photo of Murphy, and then set off in the direction of the bar area of the Base. He had very little time in which to act, and he knew that the quicker he started his search the better.

McCoy had given him a shot before he had made his secretive departure, but he knew that without a further dose in two hours time the poison would quickly start to affect his autonomic system. He had brought his communicator with him for the sole purpose of being able to operate the homing signal if it became necessary.

It was still early in the morning, and Kirk was able to make his way quickly towards the mall where most of the bars and clubs were to be found. Apart from a few early shoppers and tourists, the complex was deserted. Most of the bars were still shut, so Kirk decided to head for the Business Sector, in particular the freight office where he hoped to find out if any new ships had arrived and registered for work in the past few days. He was hoping that he might find somebody who had seen Murphy; even better, catch a sight of the man in person. In either case it would give him something to do while he waited for the

clubs to open their doors for another days trading.

The freight office at Starbase Eleven was situated near the arrival and departure buildings at the Space Port. Freelance pilots who operated privately logged their flight path with the Agency on arrival and would be contacted as soon as a piece of cargo needed transportation within their area of operation.

Kirk entered the Freight Manager's office and was greeted by a small burly gentleman dressed in a one-piece grey jumpsuit. Without looking up from his desk the man said, "G'day. Just fill in the application form and give an address where you can be contacted."

The voice was high-pitched and squeaky, belying the figure that Kirk saw in front of him.

"I'm not here to register for freight. I'm looking for someone, and I wondered whether you had seen this man." Kirk held out the photo for him.

The manager looked at it quickly. "No, I'm sorry, I've never seen him before."

"Are you sure? He arrived about five days ago and would probably have been looking for work. Take another look, please." Kirk held out the photo again, convinced that the manager was not telling him everything.

"I'm sorry, Mr... I don't think I caught your name."

"Kirk. My name is Jim Kirk."

"I'm sorry, Mr Kirk, but I assure you that no one fitting that description has registered for work with this Agency."

Kirk tried to hide his

disappointment as he pocketed the photo and turned to leave. At the door he stopped. "If he should turn up, would you contact the Base Administrator? Just mention my name and they will relay the message to me."

The manager had returned to his seat and begun to shuffle papers again. "Yes, Mr Kirk, I'll do that, if he registers for work. Now I must get on, I have a lot of work to do."

Kirk bid him farewell and left disheartened that his first point of contact had not turned up any information. He checked his watch, and, seeing that he still had an hour before opening time, he headed towards the cargo loading bays. Perhaps if he circulated the photo amongst some of the workers it might jog some memories.

The loading bays were designed so that cargo could either be beamed directly to an orbiting freighter, or transported by shuttle from adjacent Shuttle Ports. Starbase Eleven, because of its location, was used to a lot of traffic coming and going. The cargo holds reflected that fact, being large and spacious, with enough room to store vast quantities of freight. Kirk wandered from bay to bay questioning anyone that he saw, but with little success. He was about to give up and head back towards the Bar District when a voice from behind stopped him in his tracks.

"Are you the guy who has been passing around a photo and asking questions?"

Kirk turned to see a muscular dark skinned Human male who stood ten inches taller than himself. The man had dark curly hair and his face was covered in about a months-worth of beard stubble. On his right cheek he carried a jagged scar, obviously acquired from

some past disagreement with somebody. Kirk held out the photo, his hopes rising.

"Yes, I've been told that he is a freighter pilot. I was hoping to meet up with him and discuss some business. Do you know him, or know where I might find him?"

Baxter glanced at the photo quickly, and then nodded. "Yeh, I've seen him around. His name's Murphy, I think. Sean Murphy."

"Yes, that's right. Do you know where I can find him? I desperately need to talk to him." Kirk hoped his lie would go unquestioned, and tried to hide his anxiety.

"I don't know where he is right now, but I know that he'll probably be at The Golden Goose later tonight. He goes there every night for a drink."

Kirk took the photo that was handed back to him. "Thanks for your help. Maybe if I see you later I could buy you a drink or something."

Baxter laughed. "You can count on it, friend. See you later."

He watched as Kirk turned his back on him and left. When the Manager had told him that somebody had been asking after Murphy, Baxter had become curious. When he had discovered who that somebody was, at the loading bay, he knew that they could not risk being discovered regardless of the deal they had made with the Klingons. Baxter decided that they would have to take care of Kirk themselves, or run the risk of being imprisoned for their part in the attack. When Kirk arrived at The Golden Goose later that evening, he would get more than he bargained for. With a sinister grin spreading across his face, Baxter left to find Murphy and arrange their surprise

party for Captain James Kirk.

Chapter 13

McCoy paced inside Kirk's quarters, silently fuming at his own stupidity in believing that the Captain could do as he was told and stay in his quarters. Ten minutes earlier the Doctor had discovered the tape that Kirk had left for him and Spock, and had learned of his foolish plan to beam down to the planet. He had immediately contacted Spock, and summoned him to the Captain's quarters. Before Spock could enquire as to the reason McCoy had cut the connection, leaving the First Officer with no option but to comply.

When the door whooshed smoothly open McCoy stopped his pacing, and turned to look at the Vulcan framed in the doorway.

"I assume that whatever you wish to tell me is important enough to warrant the interruption to my work."

McCoy was annoyed at Spock's tone, and turned angrily on him.

"Yes, Spock, dammit, it is. Jim's taken it upon himself to try and find one of the men who attacked him. Here, he left this recording for both of us. It explains everything."

Spock took the tape that McCoy offered to him. Turning it over in his hands he moved towards the desk top terminal, McCoy following close behind. As Spock placed the tape in the slot on the side of the terminal the Doctor continued to rant, frustrated and annoyed.

"I knew I shouldn't have listened to him. I should have confined him to

Sickbay and made it a medical order. Of all the irresponsible, irrational..."

"Calm yourself, Doctor. It will not do any good to become emotional."

"Unfortunately, Spock, we can't all be as supercool and efficient as you. We can't just turn our emotions on and off, especially when the person is someone that we care deeply about. Jim may well have put his life in more danger than he could ever have imagined. We have to find him, Spock - quickly."

Although the Vulcan would never be able to show his feelings, McCoy's words had hurt him deeply. He cared about Kirk, more than the Doctor would ever be able to understand. "You can rest assured, Doctor McCoy, that we will find the Captain. Now, if you don't mind I would like to listen to this tape."

He motioned McCoy to take a seat, and activated the terminal. The viewscreen immediately came to life, showing Kirk's tired drawn features. He smiled out at them as he spoke.

"Hello, Spock, Bones. By now you will have realised that I am no longer on the ship, and that I have beamed down to the Starbase. This message is not intended to justify my actions to you, but I felt that as my closest friends you both deserved an explanation." Kirk leaned forward and paused to arrange his thoughts. "Earlier this evening I discovered the identity of one of the men who attacked me." He raised his hands at the screen, as if in anticipation of the exasperated expressions on their faces.

"Now don't go getting annoyed. I had my reasons for not wanting to tell you, and I hope you will understand my decision. If I told you of my discovery I knew that both of you would have volunteered to go in search of him.

Bones, you would have pulled rank on me and insisted that I be confined to Sickbay in order to try and prevent me from going, and Spock, you would have suspended your work on the medical scanner."

Kirk paused again, and looked up with an expression of sincerity that Spock and McCoy had seen only a few times before. "I couldn't allow either of you to risk your lives for my sake. I care too much about you to allow that to happen. Spock, I need you to continue working on the tricorder. If I fail in my efforts we will still be able to trace the Klingons with your scanner. Bones, help him out and don't blame yourself. You'll find the information on Sean Murphy in my desk, and I'll contact you as soon as I've located him." Kirk smiled as he signed off, leaving McCoy and Spock silently contemplating their actions.

Finally McCoy broke the silence. "We have to go after him, Spock, or at least I do."

"Oh, and how do you arrive at that conclusion, Doctor? If either of us should go I am surely more qualified than you."

McCoy countered, quickly silencing Spock before he could continue. "No, Spock, you don't understand. I examined Jim this morning after I gave him his shot. As the poison slowly advances it seems to be creating its own immunity system. It is counteracting the serum, and slowly rendering it ineffective. He needs constant medical supervision now, in case there is a recurrence of the attack he had last night. You are the only one who can complete the adjustments on the scanner, and finding those Klingons, and the antidote, has to be your priority. Leave Jim to me. Please, Spock, you know I'm right this time."

Spock stood silently facing McCoy, pondering the Doctor's words. Eventually he nodded. "Very well, Doctor. Unfortunately I cannot find fault with your logic; however, I must insist that you remain in constant communicator contact. I will need to know your location when I am ready to beam down."

"I can do better than that. I'll carry a subcutaneous transponder. That way you'll be able to keep track of my movements, in case communications are lost."

Spock nodded in acceptance of McCoy's suggestion, and then moved to leave. "I will say goodbye for now, and leave you to your preparations. I have much to do if I am to get the modifications finished in time, but I would like you to know that I wish you... luck."

McCoy looked up quickly to see the retreating figure of the Vulcan as he stepped out through the door, leaving him to remember a time when their roles had been reversed, and McCoy could not bring himself to wish Spock luck. (*)

He looked slowly around the room, cursing Jim silently for the umpteenth time, and then turned to collect the folder and photo that had been left on the desk. He turned in the doorway to take one last glance around the quarters, as if in silent tribute to the man who occupied them, and then hurriedly left to gather together the medical equipment that he would need to take with him, but hopefully would not require.

(*) Immunity Syndrome.

Chapter 14

Kalinh waited quietly for dusk to fall. Earlier that day she and Kreen had discussed the method for disposing of their unwanted accomplices. Shortly afterwards he had left to make some arrangements, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

On her roughly fashioned makeshift bed Kalinh stirred restlessly as she roused herself from a fitful doze. She patted her pocket lightly, satisfied when she felt the familiar shape of the vial of antitoxin.

"Well, Captain Kirk, the time has come at last." She stood and stretched her stiff muscles. She would not be sorry to see the last of this place, she thought. She opened the door at the back of the cellar and peered out into the side street. Having checked that there were no passersby walking along the street she stepped out quickly and crept along the path, careful to keep to the shadows, until she reached the main concourse. The bustle of earlier had long since dissipated, but there was still a steady stream of pedestrians making their way to the various clubs along the street.

In order to reach the building where the Leisure and Recreational facilities were housed, Kalinh had to cross the main square. She cursed as she realised that there was no way she could reach the other side without being seen. Frustrated at the unforeseen setback, she stepped back into the shadows of a darkened entranceway, desperately trying to think of a way to cross the square unseen. Just as she was beginning to think that she would have to make a run for it she was blessed with a stroke of luck.

The sound of breaking glass came from one of the small bars, followed by raised voices as a brawl spread out into

the street. The noise attracted the attention of passersby, and in the turmoil Kalinh was able to creep quickly across the precinct without being discovered. She smiled to herself and thanked whichever Gods might be overseeing her tonight. She recalled the layout plan for the Concourse and set off quickly in the direction of the first intersection. She reached the alley and ducked into the darkness. Once out of sight she relaxed slightly, and took time to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. She started to walk, scanning the walls that lined the opposite side of the alley until she found the wire grating that indicated one of the outlets for the Leisure Complex's ventilation system.

She checked that there were no vagrants lurking asleep amongst the disposal chutes and then knelt down next to the grille to unroll a small toolkit on the ground in front of her. Within a matter of minutes Kalinh had unscrewed the magnetic fixtures which held the grille firmly in place, and had laid the assembly underneath the ventilation outlet. She gathered together her toolkit, and then backed slowly into the small shaft before finally lifting the grille back into its housing.

Once inside the narrow shaft, Kalinh realised that she would not be able to turn around. Until she reached an intersection she resigned herself to the fact that she would have to crawl backwards.

After about half an hour of slow arduous crawling, Kalinh heard the distinct sound of voices from the left hand shaft that joined the one that she was now in. *That's it, she thought. I have reached the Rec level at last.*

She waited quietly until the voices faded into the distance before continuing, knowing that any movement made within the shaft would be easily heard by

anyone who might be standing near the vent outlet. As she drew closer to the opening, she noted with satisfaction that the lighting in the room on the other side of the grille had been dimmed and guessed that the security system was in effect.

The job of removing the grille from inside the shaft was far more difficult, and took Kalinth at least ten minutes. During that time her ears were attuned to every sound, and although voices could be heard from time to time, nobody passed the room in which she worked. With all of the screws loosened, Kalinth started to tap the mesh gently, first at the top and then at the bottom. She repeated the process until the grille dropped free of its mountings.

She held her breath and listened intently for any sound that would indicate that she had company. Satisfied that she was alone, Kalinth lowered the grille to the floor and pulled herself clear of the duct. She quickly removed all evidence of her break-in before moving to the door, opening it slightly. The layout plans that she had been given were true in their detail. She had arrived in the complex within a hundred yards of the holographic facilities. All that stood between her and the main computer room was a solitary guard, who sat at a desk scanning a wall of closed circuit monitors.

Carefully, Kalinth eased the door open and checked the corridor for hidden cameras. The building's designers had obviously decided that cameras would not be necessary in a corridor that was so close to the monitoring station. The guard who was hunched over the control panel with his back to her did not see her as she moved through the doorway out into the corridor. Fortunately for her, the guard who had been assigned the evening duty shift was a new employee who had

only recently completed the mandatory training course. After five hours of an uneventful watch he was about to sign off for a tea break when a movement from behind caught his attention. As he started to turn he was caught on the side of the jaw by the butt of a disruptor gun and crumpled, senseless, to the floor.

Kalinth picked up the limp body with little effort, and threw him onto her shoulder. She moved quickly to the sealed security door that would admit her into the holo computer control room. She shifted the guard's weight slightly, and then removed the pass card from her pocket and slid it through the reader in front of her. She held her breath expectantly as the computer verified the code and confirmed its validity. Silently the door slid open and she stepped through quickly.

Once inside she dropped her unwilling load heavily onto the floor and made her way towards the main control console. Her heart started to beat faster as she began to realise that she would soon see the results of her painstakingly calculated plan. She smiled as she imagined the expression on her enemy's face when he was confronted by the Spectres of the Past, as she had named them, before the poison finally ran its course and claimed his life. She congratulated herself, silently relishing the thought of the exquisite torture that he would suffer.

Extracting a small tape from her uniform pocket she loaded it into the computer tape housing and issued the command for her own hologram program to be loaded. All that remained for her to do now was to wait for the arrival of her guest. She leaned forward and flipped the switch that would activate a board of monitors which duplicated the views displayed by the monitoring station in the hall. From here Kalinth could now see

every approach to the computer room and would be alerted the instant that somebody entered the building.

Satisfied with her precautions, she rose and moved towards the guard, deciding that it was time to ensure that he did not arouse too quickly.

Chapter 15

At about the same time that Kalinth was negotiating her way through the ventilation shafts within the leisure complex, Kirk was making his way along the busy mall towards the Golden Goose.

The outside of the bar looked no different from any of the other dozen or so establishments arranged along the broadwalk. The only noticeable difference that set the Golden Goose apart from the rest was the volume of noise that came from within. Looking through the doorway Kirk could see that even at this early hour in the evening the bar was already crowded, and a thin haze of smoke had started to rise from the occupied tables and booths.

As Kirk crossed towards the bar his movement attracted the stares of several pairs of eyes, curious to see who the stranger was. Their curiosity satisfied, they quickly returned to their poker games or conversations. The barman moved towards Kirk, answering his summons.

"What can I get ya, Mister?"

Kirk had not been feeling very well since midday, having had several attacks of nausea and dizziness. Not wishing to aggravate an already worsening condition he replied, "I'll just have a mineral water if you've got one... with ice."

The barman looked at him in disgust as he leaned under the counter and retrieved a clean glass from the dispenser. As he filled the glass he looked suspiciously at his customer. "Are you just in? I haven't seen your face around here before."

Kirk took the glass that was offered to him and handed over a single credit. "Yes, I'm waiting for somebody. We agreed to meet here tonight."

The lie seemed to ease the barman's suspicions as he took the credit and turned away to serve another new arrival. Before long Kirk had been forgotten, and sat back on his stool with a careful eye on the doorway, waiting for any glimpse of the man he had come to find.

Kirk looked at his chronometer, and realised that he had been waiting for just over three hours. His initial eagerness at the prospect of confronting Murphy had slowly faded as the evening wore on, and he was just about to give up for the night when a hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Hi there, remember me?"

Kirk turned to see Baxter grinning widely at him.

"Yes, I remember. You were the guy who said that I might find Murphy here tonight. Well, no luck so far."

"No, I know, that's why I'm here. I bumped into Sean earlier today and I told him you were looking for him. Unfortunately he's been forced to lie low for a few days, something to do with an overdue gambling debt, he said. Anyway, if you still want to see him, I was told to take you to where he is staying."

"I see," Kirk said slowly, looking at Baxter. He started to get that familiar feeling that always forewarned him that trouble wasn't too far away. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled as the adrenalin started to flow. He knew that he might well be walking into a setup, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity of finding Murphy. He came to a decision as he finished his drink and stood.

"Okay. I'll just use the toilet and be right with you."

Baxter nodded and leaned against the bar. "Take your time. Don't mind me, I'll just have a quick drink while I'm waiting. You owe me one, remember?"

Kirk nodded and headed towards the nearest mensroom. He didn't want to arouse Baxter's suspicions so he had to act as quickly as he could.

Once in the privacy of a cubicle Kirk took out his communicator and contacted the Enterprise. The response was immediate. Spock had taken the precaution earlier of ensuring that all planetside communication was directed to his workstation in the lab.

"Spock here, Captain. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Spock, I'm fine, but I don't have much time to explain. Listen carefully. I think I may have found Murphy, but I might need your help. His friend is taking me to meet with him now, but I have a feeling that it might be a trap. I'm going to activate my homing signal so that you can pick up my location, but I don't want to be beamed back to the ship. If you do, he'll know we're on to him and run. Have some Security men standing by to beam down once my location stabilises. Give me about ten minutes; Murphy shouldn't be too far away." A

wave of nausea swept over him suddenly and he grabbed at the side of the door to steady himself. "And you'd better send McCoy down with them. I think he might be needed."

"I will inform Doctor McCoy immediately. He is already at the Base looking for you. Are you sure you are feeling all right? The Doctor seemed to feel that he should find you as soon as possible."

Kirk ignored the obvious concern in Spock's voice. "Yes, I'm fine, Spock. You know Bones, he's always fussing. I've got to go or else Baxter will start getting suspicious. Kirk out."

As soon as the communication had been terminated Spock contacted Doctor McCoy and relayed the information to him.

"How did he sound, Spock? Was he all right?"

Spock recalled the conversation with Kirk and remembered the tiredness in his friend's voice, the denial that anything was the matter.

"The sooner that he is found and is back under your care the better it will be. I will relay the coordinates to you and suggest that you hurry. Spock out."

McCoy cursed softly, knowing that in his own way Spock had just told him that Kirk was clearly in trouble and would need his medical help quickly. Checking that his phaser was in its place and set to stun, he slung his medical case across his back and set off in the direction indicated by the signal that Spock was relaying through to his communicator.

Chapter 16

When Kirk returned Baxter was seated on a stool at the end of the bar, deep in conversation with the bartender. From the relaxed way they were talking to each other, Kirk guessed that they were well acquainted. He forced the feeling of unease to the back of his mind, and moved through the crowded tables towards Baxter.

"Sorry I kept you waiting. Shall we get moving?"

Baxter turned and grinned with a glare that made Kirk go cold inside. He emptied his glass and rose from the stool. "Ready when you are. See you later, Jack." He waved to the bartender and moved, much to Kirk surprise, towards the rear of the room. He turned when he saw that Kirk was not following him.

"Are you coming, then?"

Kirk sighed and quickly followed the receding figure out through a back door, wondering what was in store for him.

Once they had left the noise of the bar behind, Kirk found himself following Baxter down a narrow brick corridor that smelt damp and musty. A single bare bulb shone from the middle of the low ceiling, and both men had to stoop to avoid hitting it as they passed.

The corridor ended at a single wooden door, and when Baxter reached it he stopped and waited for Kirk to join him.

"I know you said that Murphy was lying low, but don't you think this is overdoing things slightly?" Kirk said apprehensively as he came to stand between Baxter and the door.

The big man chuckled. "You don't know the type of person that is trying to find him." The glint that appeared in Baxter's eyes at that statement made Kirk regret he had ever decided to follow him. Without taking his eyes from Baxter's face he replied, "Oh I don't know, I've met some pretty determined people in my time."

The smile quickly faded from Baxter's face and he reached out and knocked loudly on the door three times.

"Sean, it's me. I brought the guy who wants to talk to you."

Kirk faintly heard the sound of movement from the other side of the door and eventually two heavy bolts were pulled back. Discreetly he patted his hip pocket to reassure himself that the small phaser was still secreted there.

The door opened slowly and Baxter motioned for Kirk to go through. Reluctantly he obliged, and stepped through into the dark cellar. Before he had a chance to realise what was happening Baxter shoved him from behind, and he stumbled and fell awkwardly down a couple of steps that he had failed to notice in the dim lighting. He lay on the floor breathing heavily, and was aware of the door being closed and bolted behind him.

Baxter came down to stand behind him, and pulled him roughly onto his feet. Kirk winced as the sudden movements caused his freshly bound ribs to jar. He was dragged into the centre of the room, where a second figure was waiting. Looking up into the man's face, he realised that he had indeed found Sean Murphy.

"Well, Captain Kirk, I can't honestly say that it is a pleasure to meet you again, but unfortunately this meeting has

become necessary." He stepped closer to Kirk. "If you only but realised, Captain, how much your interference has cost both Baxter and myself. If it hadn't been for your snooping we would have made a nice profit. As it has turned out, I'm afraid that now you know our identities we can't take the risk of you informing the authorities."

Kirk grinned, taunting Murphy, and at the same time hoping that Spock would soon arrive with the Security guards.

"You honestly didn't expect me to just sit back and do nothing did you? You must be more stupid than you look."

Murphy glared at him for a moment, and then started to laugh. "No, I don't suppose we did, but if you had you would have lived longer - slightly, anyway."

Kirk started to laugh again, which annoyed Murphy immensely. Without warning he turned on him and buried his fist in his midriff.

"But we're going to make amends for that now."

The force of the blow caught Kirk full in the stomach and caused him to double over in agony. Baxter released his shoulders and Kirk crumpled to the floor, trying desperately to draw air back into his lungs. Minutes seemed to pass before the pain started to subside and he could open his eyes.

He blinked once to regain his focus, and looked up into the sneering face of Baxter. *Where was Spock?* he thought. *He should be here by now.*

Slowly he pulled his legs underneath him and started to rise, but before he could regain his balance

Murphy lashed out from his blind side with his foot and connected with Kirk's chin. This time the impact sent Kirk hurtling into the corner of the room where he crashed heavily against the brick wall before sinking slowly to the floor. As he lay dazed, he could feel a steady wet trickle from his nose, and the distinct taste of blood in his mouth started to make him feel nauseous. A wave of dizziness passed over him, and he shook his head slowly, trying to fight off the growing sensation of impending collapse.

Suddenly, from somewhere that seemed far away, he heard a loud bang followed by the sound of a familiar voice.

"That's enough! Now you just hold it right there!"

Caught completely by surprise, Murphy and Baxter turned as one to see the figure of McCoy standing in the doorway that led up to the street. He was holding a phaser, and had it levelled directly at the two men.

"Move over there up against the wall."

The Doctor moved round to put himself between the men now standing against the wall and the prone figure of Kirk, without once taking his eyes off of his prisoners. Slowly he stepped back towards Kirk and knelt down beside him. He glanced down quickly and saw that even though Kirk's eyelids were half closed he was still conscious, but only just. With his free hand he found the pulse in his neck and was relieved to find it reasonably steady, considering the beating that he had obviously just taken.

At the touch of McCoy's hand, Kirk groaned slightly and tried to move around.

"Lie still, Jim. I don't know the

extent of your injuries yet, and I don't want you to put any undue strain on yourself."

Kirk chuckled softly. "I'm afraid it didn't quite turn out the way I had planned."

"Quite. Don't try to talk."

McCoy placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and then rose to direct his attention back towards Murphy and Baxter. Walking back to where he had left his medical equipment, he extracted the communicator and flipped it open.

Before McCoy had a chance to utter a word he was interrupted by a gruff voice that came from the shadows off to his left.

"That will not be necessary, Doctor McCoy. I suggest you put down the communicator and join your fellow Humans over against the wall."

McCoy stood in shocked horror at the sight of the Klingon warrior who stepped forward into the light. In his left hand he saw the familiar sight of a Klingon disruptor gun as Kreen motioned him over to the wall where Murphy and Baxter were standing.

Murphy started to move forward towards Kreen. "I never thought I'd be glad to see you, but your timing is impeccable."

Kreen looked at him through cold emotionless eyes. "You may not think so soon, Mr Murphy. Now please rejoin your friend."

As if to confirm his intentions, he shoved the disruptor into Murphy's midriff and forced him backwards.

"Now just hold on. We had an

agreement, remember? We're working together."

Without dropping his gaze from the bewildered figure of Murphy Kreen replied, "*Had* is the operative word, Mr Murphy. Our agreement, as you called it, has been terminated. We are no longer in need of your services."

Kreen stepped back and glanced down at the figure of Kirk, still lying motionless in the corner. "Besides which, our agreement did not include a provision for damaged goods."

Kreen switched his gaze towards McCoy, and with the same lack of emotion in his voice asked, "I assume that he is still alive? My Commander will be most upset if she is to be cheated out of her final glory."

McCoy seethed with anger as he replied, "Yes, you callous son of a bitch, he's still alive and will remain that way if I have anything to do about it."

Kreen grinned widely as he returned to stand in front of them. "I doubt that very much, Doctor McCoy, because your Captain will only outlive you by a few hours."

Baxter could contain himself no longer. Frightened and scared at the way the Klingon was acting he lunged forward, pleading desperately. "Now look here we, didn't mean no harm, we were just having a little fun. We..."

Without a moment's hesitation Kreen turned and fired his disruptor. The beam hit Baxter squarely in the middle of his chest and he screamed. Slowly, his body evaporated until nothing was left except the strong stench of scorching flesh.

Kreen turned the disruptor on

Murphy, who started to cower away from the Klingon.

"No, please don't. Take the money back. I don't need it, only please don't..."

His final plea died on his lips as the disruptor was activated for the second time. McCoy looked on in horror as both men were reduced to vapour. He turned on Kreen, anger disguising the fear for his own safety.

"You cold-blooded murderer! They didn't stand a chance! You've just killed two people without even batting an eye..."

"Come, come, Doctor, what should you care? After all, they were instrumental in your Captain's demise."

McCoy's anger flared. "What gives you the almighty right to play with people's lives? You're nothing but a butcher, the whole goddamn lot of you!"

Kreen's patience had been tested to the limit. "Enough. You have had your say, and now I'm afraid it is time for me to say goodbye."

He raised the disruptor and McCoy found himself looking down the nozzle. He held his breath, waiting for the inevitable sound and the impact as the beam hit and started to vaporize him. He closed his eyes as he saw Kreen's finger tighten on the firing button and then there came the whine as the beam lashed out towards him.

Strangely, McCoy did not feel any pain. At first he thought that the Klingon must have somehow managed to miss his mark, but then he thought that God had obviously been kind to him and spared him the suffering of any pain. It took him a good minute to realise that something else had happened to stop Kreen from

carrying out his death sentence.

He opened his eyes slowly, to discover that he was standing alone in the room save for the figure lying hunched up in the corner. When McCoy looked again, he could see that Kirk was holding a phaser in his hands and still had it pointed in his direction.

McCoy, prompted into action by the appearance of his friend, collected his medical kit and moved over to Kirk's side. The Captain had not registered McCoy's arrival, but continued to stare blankly into the centre of the room. The Doctor reached out and gently prised his fingers from around the phaser, one by one, speaking softly to him as he did so.

"It's okay, Jim, just take it easy. Do you hear me?"

McCoy did not expect an answer to his question, but slowly the glazed expression on Kirk's face disappeared, to be replaced by one of recognition and relief.

"Bones, is that you? Oh my God, Bones, I thought he'd killed you... I couldn't focus to fire... I didn't know if I'd manage to kill him... Oh God..."

The strain and tension of the last few minutes finally caught up with him, and he broke down and cried with utter relief. McCoy found himself fighting to retain his own composure, and he reached out and pulled Jim into an embrace.

"I couldn't let him kill you, Bones. No matter what the cost, I had to use my phaser."

McCoy bowed his head and cried then, realising that by saving his life Kirk might have sacrificed his only chance of finding the antidote.

Suddenly the room filled with the familiar sparkle of an energising transporter beam, and three figures appeared in front of McCoy. With a quick glance around the empty room, Spock's eyes came to rest on the sight of Kirk. Without a word he turned to the Security guards who had accompanied him and gave them orders to stand guard, one at each entrance to the cellar.

Once the guards had been despatched, Spock returned to kneel next to Kirk.

"Dammit, Spock, what the hell took you so long?" McCoy shouted.

"Unfortunately, Doctor, we lost the Captain's signal, and it took me a while to readjust to the transponder frequency."

To the untrained eye Spock's face was expressionless, but McCoy saw the look of sorrow that passed across the Vulcan's features. McCoy unfortunately did not have much in the way of good news.

"He's taken quite a beating, Spock. Apart from a fractured cheek bone and a broken nose, the ribs that had started to knit have been re-broken. Having said that, though, he is holding his own. I can give him a painkiller until we get him back on the Enterprise, but we're running out of options. The Klingon killed the two men who attacked Jim, and was about to turn on me. I'm afraid that Jim killed him and any chance of finding the antidote died with him."

Spock removed the tricorder that had been slung across his shoulder. "Indeed, Doctor. Then can you explain to me why I am still picking up a Klingon lifeform in the vicinity?" Spock turned around until the reading stabilized. "Bearing 220 mark 6."

McCoy grinned with relief. "Of course, I forgot that there were two of them! Kalinith must have left the other Klingon behind to deal with Murphy and Baxter while she made her escape. She obviously didn't bargain on the fact that Murphy would take the law into his own hands."

A sudden movement on the floor captured McCoy's attention, as Kirk started to show signs of regaining consciousness.

"Easy, Jim. Don't try to move until I get you back on the Enterprise. You're in pretty rough shape."

Kirk turned to look up at Spock and McCoy and reached out to grab the Doctor's arm. "No, Bones, please. I'm all right. I heard what Spock said about the second Klingon and I'm staying here."

"I won't allow it, Jim. Setting aside the fact that the poison is in the advanced stage of its progression, you have sustained injuries that need treatment. You're going back to the Enterprise."

"No I'm not," Kirk shot back sharply, and then calmed himself when he saw the look of astonishment and hurt on McCoy's face.

"Please listen to me for just a minute. Don't you see, this whole ordeal has been a game for Kalinith. All along she planned her moves to the last detail. I think she's expecting me to turn up for the final encounter. You'll stand a better chance of finding the antidote if I'm there to attract her attention."

McCoy started to object but Kirk continued, "Please Bones, think about it. You know it makes sense."

"Unfortunately, Doctor, I tend to agree with the Captain. Kalinith has been

very predictable so far. I would even go so far as to say premeditative. She is expecting Jim to find her and will almost certainly have the antidote with her. I'm afraid we no longer have a choice."

McCoy looked from Kirk to Spock and then back to Kirk. "Why is it that every time you two get together I always get out-voted?" He held up his arms in a gesture of resignation. "I want you both to know that I am agreeing to this under extreme protest. In fact I think I need my head examined."

Kirk started to rise and was firmly restrained by McCoy's outstretched hand.

"Oh no you don't. Before we go chasing after Klingons you're going to need something to help with the pain. Just sit there while I give you a painkiller."

He looked directly into Kirk's eyes, hoping he would find some sign that Kirk was admitting to being in pain, but the Captain was hiding his feelings too well.

"Okay, Bones, but I don't want anything that's going to make me feel drowsy. I need to keep my wits about me."

"Don't worry, this will make you feel as if you've got the strength of two men, but I warn you now, if we get through all this you're going to be spending the next three weeks in Sickbay, and no arguments, or I'll write you up."

Kirk started to protest, but realised that it would be futile.

"You're a hard man sometimes, Bones."

McCoy smiled as he administered the painkiller to Kirk. "You better believe it, Jim boy."

Between the two of them they helped Kirk up onto his feet and while McCoy collected together his medical equipment Spock scanned with his tricorder to confirm the directions. With the two Security guards following, they headed out of the cellar with Spock leading the way.

Chapter 17

The mall was quiet. All signs of the earlier bustle had long since disappeared. The shop windows which fronted onto the main walkways were dark, hiding the wares that were on display to passing shoppers during the daylight hours.

The main street lighting was lit, but had been dimmed to represent the lateness of the evening. The only noticeable sound was the faint patter and splashing of the ornamental fountain as it glistened under the arrangement of spotlights that shone down on it.

With Spock taking the lead the small party crossed the darkened area, their footsteps echoing loudly as they moved. McCoy walked at Kirk's side, ready to offer a supporting hand if it was required. To his professional eye, the Doctor could see that Kirk was still experiencing some difficulty, despite the painkillers. His breathing came in short irregular breaths, and his movements were stiff and awkward. Kirk had been aware of the constant attention that McCoy had been giving him since they had left the cellar, and he was becoming more and more irritated with the Doctor's pampering. Finally he could contain himself no longer. He turned, glaring at McCoy.

"Bones, for goodness sake, will you stop looking at me as if I'm about to drop! I'm okay. I can manage, honest."

Suddenly McCoy's features blurred as everything faded out of focus. Kirk shook his head to clear it and then swayed. The Doctor steadied him with an outstretched hand and replied sarcastically, "Sure you are. But if you don't mind, I'll continue to keep my eye on you because I don't believe you... Captain."

Kirk stared back angrily but did not reply. Eventually he pulled his arm free from McCoy's grasp and continued on in the direction of Spock and the Security guards. McCoy gazed at Kirk's back as he hurried to catch up with his First Officer. He sighed in exasperation and then set off quickly to follow them.

Up ahead, Kirk peered down at the tricorder that Spock was holding out in front of him. A small green light flashed steadily, indicating that their quarry was in the building directly in front of them. Kirk looked at the plate in front of the main entrance.

"Now what would a Klingon be doing inside a Leisure Complex?"

Spock made no comment, but turned towards Kirk and raised his eyebrows quizzically.

As McCoy joined them Kirk glared at him and then at Spock before saying, "Well, I suppose there's only one way to find out." He started towards the main entrance but was stopped as Spock held his arm.

"Captain, I suggest that you allow the Security guards to check the doors for booby traps first. We don't know what Kalinith has in mind but I think it would be wise to take all possible precautions."

"I agree with Spock, Jim. Let's not rush in like a bull in china shop."

Kirk pursed his lips, annoyed at McCoy's blatant comment about his disregard for safety, but refrained from replying. Instead he nodded his head in compliance, and waited while the entrance was checked for explosive devices.

Once inside the main foyer, Spock again checked the signal on his tricorder. "The signal is strongest in that direction," he said, pointing down a corridor that ended at a turbolift.

Sending the Security men on ahead, Spock motioned for Kirk and McCoy to remain together until he gave them a sign to follow. Slowly he moved down the corridor, his eyes never leaving the tricorder for fear that he might miss some change in the signal. When he reached the turbolift he motioned for Kirk and McCoy to join him.

"It seems that Kalinith is on one of the levels above us on this side of the building."

"Well, let's go. What are we waiting for?" McCoy stammered impatiently.

Kirk looked at Spock curiously and then answered the Doctor's question, suddenly realising the reason for Spock's apprehension.

"I think Spock is trying to tell us that once the turbolift doors open again we will be sitting ducks, so to speak. A perfect target for a trap."

"Aren't there any stairs in this place, for Gods sake?" McCoy said, looking around in the hope of finding a doorway that indicated a flight of stairs.

Spock looked at the Doctor as he replied, "Unfortunately not. The designers did not feel that stairs were necessary considering the advances in

engineering technology."

Kirk interrupted. "Look, I'll be damned if I'm going to risk your lives any further. Spock, give me the tricorder and I'll go alone." He wiped his forehead with his hand shakily. "You and Bones wait here until I..."

McCoy cut him off. "No way, Jim. You can hardly stand without support, let alone confront Kalinith if you actually find her. We all go. No arguments."

"Doctor McCoy is quite correct... for once. You are in no condition to consider a physical encounter. It will be my job to find the antidote while you and Doctor McCoy distract her attention."

Kirk looked at his two friends with renewed admiration, realising that they might both be putting their lives in extreme danger. He smiled warmly at them as he said quietly, "My friends, let's go."

They instructed one of the Security guards to stand watch at the turbolift doors on the base level while the other was to remain at the entrance on the next level, if they managed to reach it without incident. The four men entered the lift and ascended to Level One. Kirk held the door release, preventing the doors from opening while Spock checked his tricorder. He shook his head. "No, not this level. Try the next one."

The lift ascended once more and came slowly to a halt. Spock repeated his scan, and then looked up at Kirk and McCoy, who were both waiting anxiously. "This is the level."

Kirk inhaled nervously and then nodded his head. "Right. Let's all back up against the walls to either side of the doors. The smaller the target we give her, the more likely that one of us might get in

a shot or two. Phasers on stun."

They all positioned themselves along the two walls on either side of the door. When everyone was ready he slowly removed his hand from the door release and held his breath.

Nothing happened. There was no sound of phaser fire, or explosions as hidden bombs were triggered. After a moment Kirk peered around the side of the lift opening and stared into an empty corridor. The only movement was from a security camera that tracked towards him as the sensors detected the movement. They stepped out of the lift slowly, still cautious and ready to react to any sudden noise.

From where they stood a long corridor stretched out in front of them. Each side had numerous doors leading into offices, all of which were closed. Spock could see a work station several hundred yards ahead, with what appeared to be a row of monitor screens behind it; however, no signs of life were evident.

Kirk moved off down the corridor and motioned for the others to follow. McCoy exchanged worried glances with Spock and then both men followed the retreating figure of their Captain.

As they approached the monitoring station their senses again became attuned for any signs of danger. Spock walked around the desk, scanning the screens and the computer terminal.

"This is most peculiar, Captain."

Kirk turned and looked in Spock's direction. "What have you found, Spock?"

"This is one of five Security monitoring stations. It is usually manned

twenty-four hours a day unless there is an emergency. The log shows no such emergency, therefore a Security guard should be on duty."

Kirk tensed as he replied, "I see. Well evidently we are on the right track. Where do we go...?"

Before he could complete his question to Spock, Kirk was interrupted by the familiar voice of Kalinith.

"Congratulations, Captain Kirk, on your persistence. I have been looking forward to our meeting face to face."

Kirk swung around to face the screens from which the sound had come.

"Where are you, dammit? Show yourself!" he shouted angrily, punching the desktop with his fist.

"All in good time, Captain," she laughed. "Doctor McCoy, you really should advise your Captain that it is unwise for him to stress himself so... it is not healthy." The speakers filled with the sound of hysterical laughter.

"Come out, you goddamn coward!" Kirk's voice rose.

McCoy moved across to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, Jim. We'll find her. She can't get off this level without using the turbolift, and we've got them guarded. As much as I hate to admit it, she's right. You have to stay calm. The more worked up you get the faster your adrenalin will flow, and the faster the poison will be pumped around your system.

Kirk nodded slowly, looking into McCoy's concerned face. "Okay, Bones, I'll try. It's just that I feel so helpless. I can't control the situation, and that scares me."

McCoy looked back at Kirk, and suddenly realised the reason for the denials that anything was seriously wrong. Normally a person who could control or manipulate his own future, Kirk was having to adjust to the realisation that this time he was not able to dictate his moves.

The Doctor placed a comforting arm around Kirk's shoulder. "Hey, let's have no more talk like that. We'll see this thing through together, the three of us. Do you hear?"

McCoy held Kirk's shoulders firmly and tried desperately to read the expression on his face. Finally the Captain looked up slowly to meet the Doctor's gaze and nodded solemnly. McCoy relaxed visibly as he read the message that the dark hazel eyes conveyed, and gradually released his grip from the broad shoulders. With one final nod, Kirk turned back towards Spock.

"Where do we go from here, Spock?"

As if in answer to his question, one of the doors that led to the holohalls opened in front of them.

"I believe that we have been given an answer, Captain."

Kirk nodded glumly. "So it appears. Shall we go?"

The room that they entered was in darkness, save for the light that shone through the open doorway. Kirk moved towards the sensor that would activate the lights. Suddenly a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"I would rather that you didn't touch that, Kirk. For now I prefer to remain in the dark."

Kirk stared into the darkness, trying to find the source of the voice. The fact that he was unable to see his opponent made him feel uneasy. With an act of defiance he stepped towards where he thought the centre of the room would be.

"Well, Kalinth, you've got what you wanted. I'm here. Now why won't you show yourself?"

"All in good time, Captain. At the moment I appear to be slightly outnumbered. My companion does not appear to have been able to join me, and I was wondering if you knew anything about that."

Kirk was still trying to identify the direction of the voice as he continued to talk. "Unfortunately your companion, as you call him, met with an untimely demise."

He looked towards McCoy who nodded his agreement, the merest hint of a smile evident in his expression.

There was silence for a while, as Kalinth paid silent homage to Kreen for his devotion to duty. Finally she gathered together her thoughts and returned to the task before her. With Kreen gone her chances of survival were practically non-existent, but that did not dissuade her. She would die in honour, knowing that she had been the one to defeat James Kirk.

"No matter," she said. "I'm sure that Kreen died with honour, carrying out my orders. Now, Kirk, I suggest you instruct your two officers to put down their weapons in the hallway, and that you do the same. And don't forget I can see your every movement."

Kirk, McCoy and Spock did as they were told. When they stepped back into the room for the second time the door

closed slowly behind them, and the room was bathed in brightness as the main lights came on. All three officers stared at the figure standing in the opposite corner. Kalinth stood tall, her feet slightly apart and her arms folded across her chest. In her hand she held a disruptor just to show that she was fully armed. She smiled menacingly. "That's better. Now the odds are more in my favour."

McCoy, who had remained silent, patiently waiting for some sign that they would soon be able to retrieve the antidote, could contain himself no longer. "We're sick and tired of your games, Kalinth. Get to the point. What is the purpose of all this?"

He started forward angrily, and was restrained by Kirk, who stood in his path.

"Bones, take it easy. Do you want to get yourself killed?" He coughed slightly as he held McCoy.

"I'm sorry, Jim. It's just that I get so frustrated. We're wasting time just talking....." McCoy stopped as he noticed that Kirk's grip had tightened and he paled considerably. McCoy reached out and supported Kirk around the waist. "Are you all right, Jim?"

"I'll be okay; a little dizzy, that's all. Just give me a minute to clear my head."

Spock could see that Kirk was in trouble and moved forwards in order to help McCoy lower him to the ground. The Doctor withdrew the medical scanner from his pocket and took a quick reading. Without uttering a word, he looked across at Spock and shook his head glumly. McCoy moved towards the door where he had left his medical case.

"Where are you going, Doctor?" Kalinth asked.

McCoy turned angrily towards her. "He needs some medication. I'm sure that you would have no objections to my trying to keep him alive a little longer. After all, I'm sure there is a purpose to this charade." Without waiting for an answer he collected his equipment and returned to Kirk, who was sitting slumped with his head between his knees. Removing a hypo from his case he set it and pressed it against Kirk's arm. "This'll make you feel a bit better, Jim."

Kirk nodded and took a deep breath, feeling the effects of the stimulant as it started to work.

When Kalinth had assured herself that Kirk was reacting to McCoy's ministrations, she moved towards the party.

"Oh yes, Doctor McCoy, there is a purpose to this charade as you call it. You see, Captain Kirk is responsible for the death of my uncle. In the Klingon Empire a warrior clan cannot rest until a wrongful death is avenged. I have been chosen to carry out that task, hence my presence here."

McCoy stood angrily and faced Kalinth head on. "A wrongful death! My God, Kruge killed Kirk's son and would have killed Kirk as well if he had been given the chance..."

Kalinth waved her arm through the air. "Spare me your futile explanations. I have read the official reports. The fact remains that Kirk is responsible for the deaths of the crew of an entire Bird of Prey. He tried to keep the secret of Genesis, and in doing so committed murder. The fact that the Federation Council was unwilling to bring charges only confirms the fact. I believe your own Bible has a saying, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the phrase is 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

Kalinth moved towards a small pedestal which acted as a control console. She pressed a single button and waited. "I have taken a great deal of time in deciding on a fitting place for you to die, Captain Kirk. I hope you like the place I have chosen."

Chapter 18

Kirk glared at Kalinth as she stood, proud and smug, behind the console. The expression on her face made him feel anxious as he started to worry about the safety of his friends. He looked up at the motionless figure of Spock, as he stood and stared silently in the same direction, and wondered what would be going through the Vulcan's mind at this moment.

"Spock, I don't like this at all. I don't know how much longer I can keep going, and by the look on her face she's just beginning to enjoy herself. I'm going to tell her to release you and Bones. This is my battle. If I'm going to die, I don't want your deaths on my conscience."

Spock held up a hand to silence Kirk. "Captain... Jim... please listen to me. Neither of us will leave you. Not only are you our Captain and our superior officer, but more importantly you are our friend. We cannot - *will not* - allow you to fight Kalinth alone. Together we will find a way to defeat her. Now just relax and allow Doctor McCoy..."

Kirk tensed suddenly, his eyes widening in horror as the walls shimmered and took on a new appearance. He heard the intake of breath from McCoy, who was standing at his side. "Oh my God, no!" the Doctor exclaimed, horrified.

With a great effort, Kirk stood up

slowly and looked around, transfixed by what he saw.

Kalinh activated the control console, and the program that she had entered into the computer was loaded. Before all their eyes the room shimmered and started to reform with holographic images that depicted a landscape.

They found themselves standing in a rocky clearing. On one side the wall had taken on the form of a high cliff. The other three were lined with trees that disappeared into the darkness. Fallen trees lay all around them. Some had been uprooted with what appeared to have been a tremendous force.

The wind was blowing strongly, forcing Kirk and McCoy to shield their faces from the flying debris. It was night time, but the clearing was lit by the constant flashes of lightning and raw flame that erupted from the many ground fissures.

Kalinh had successfully reproduced a holographic replica of the Genesis Planet just as the three of them remembered it. She laughed loudly, seeing the end product of her planning, gaining satisfaction as she looked towards Kirk and saw the horror-stricken look on his face.

"Well Captain Kirk, how do you like your final resting place? I thought that it would be fitting for you to share the same fate as my uncle. My only regret is that this is a reproduction."

McCoy glanced across at Kirk, and knew that he somehow had to convince him that this was only an illusion. The expression on Kirk's face gave cause for concern, as the Doctor realised that he was beginning to relive the events of that last time on Genesis.

He gripped Kirk by the shoulders and shook him hard. Shouting to be heard above the howling wind he cried, "Jim, snap out of it! It's not real! She knows what happened on Genesis and has created an image which she knows will hurt you. Jim, for Gods sake listen to me!"

Unseeing, Kirk looked past McCoy at the scene that unfolded before him. In desperation, McCoy turned to where Spock was standing. "We've got to get him out of here, Spock! He's too vulnerable - this could push him over the edge!"

Since they had entered the room Spock had remained silent, seeking an opportunity to catch Kalinh off her guard. He had watched helplessly as his friend's condition had slowly deteriorated, unable to comfort him for fear that the distraction would cost him his opportunity to reach Kalinh before she had a chance to use the disruptor on him. Hearing the tone of sheer desperation in McCoy's voice, he knew that he would have to act quickly.

"Very well, Doctor, you take care of the Captain."

Before McCoy had a chance to ask Spock what he meant, the Vulcan stepped out and started to walk towards the Klingon.

Kalinh saw the movement, and lowered the disruptor until it was pointing directly at Spock. "What's the matter, Spock? Don't you like my little surprise?"

Spock continued to walk towards her. "No, I do not. Your actions are both unwarranted and illegal. Your uncle was a tyrant and a murderer. His only ambition was to achieve glory for himself. He was not interested in

whether the Empire would benefit, as long as it meant power and wealth for himself."

It was working. Spock's attack on the character of Kruge was distracting Kalinth's attention away from Kirk and McCoy.

"You lie! He went after the Genesis device because he knew it would be a great weapon in the hands of the Empire. Your own government's secretiveness was responsible for the death of Kirk's son. My uncle was entitled to use any means at his disposal to secure the project material."

"That did not include kidnapping and murder. For that there is no excuse. Your uncle was a disgrace to the Klingon name."

Kalith pointed the gun angrily towards Spock's chest. "Enough! I have heard enough of your lies! Don't come any closer, or I'll kill you where you stand."

The expression on Kalith's face left Spock in no doubt as to her sincerity. He stepped back next to a small tree, not taking his eyes away from her.

Satisfied that the Vulcan would pose no further threat, she turned back towards Kirk and McCoy once again.

"Now, Captain Kirk, tell me - is this how you remember it, or have I forgotten something?"

She grinned, and then touched a button on the console. Two figures suddenly materialized in front of Kirk and McCoy. The Doctor could see that they were Klingon officers, and immediately realised what Kalith was about to do. He turned quickly.

"My God! Don't do this. Please stop it now!" He started towards her, but was stopped in midstride when Kalith fired at the ground in front of him.

"That's enough, Doctor. Captain Kirk is going to pay for my uncle's death, and I'm going to take great delight in watching him suffer."

She pressed another button, and three more figures appeared in the clearing.

Spock closed his eyes as he recognised the holographic recreation Saavik, David Marcus and himself. He fought to control his own inner emotions at seeing the sight in front of him as he himself realised what Kalith intended to do. He would need all his concentration if he was going to succeed in his task.

McCoy recovered from his initial shock and ran back towards Kirk. A look of disbelief was evident on Kirk's features, and McCoy knew that he was having difficulty coming to terms with the situation. The Doctor turned him around sharply, so that they were standing face to face. "Jim, it's only an illusion, remember that. It's not real."

Kirk started to move forward. "It's like the dreams, Bones. I can save David this time. I won't let him die! Not again."

McCoy did not like the sound of Kirk's voice, the expression of joy that crossed his face at the chance of being reunited with his son.

A sudden movement caught his attention, and he turned in time to see a Klingon guard pull his battle dagger from its scabbard and circle the trio of hostages.

"No!" Kirk shouted. "I won't let you kill him!" He started to move

forward quickly, no longer hearing the desperate cries from McCoy behind him. The Klingon raised his dagger behind Saavik, and then David quickly jerked him out of the way. They wrestled together on the ground, rolling over and over, held in each others grip until they finally broke free at the base of the cliff.

Kirk had reached the area where the three scientists had been detained. He saw the two figures grappling at the cliff face, but in his desperation to reach them he did not see the rock half buried in the earth until it was too late. His foot caught it and he lurched forward, flailing wildly as he fell heavily to the ground.

"Jim!" McCoy shouted, as he raced towards his fallen friend. He reached Kirk, who was trying desperately to rise. "Got to get to David... Got to stop....!"

He looked up to see David being thrust away by the Klingon. The young man stumbled and fell to the ground. Before he had a chance to recover the Klingon was on top of him, knife raised ready to attack. With a final desperate attempt, David tried to push the knife away but his opponent's strength was too great.

McCoy had his eyes shut tight, and heard rather than saw the sickening sound as the knife made contact with flesh and penetrated David's body. He felt Kirk go rigid in his grip as he cried out.

"No... No...! Oh my God, please... not again... David..." He buried his head in his hands. "David... no..."

McCoy held him tightly, his anger towards Kalinth exceeded only by his compassion for Kirk. Finally Kirk's crying ceased, and he lay motionless in McCoy's arms. The Doctor knew that he had to make Kirk understand that he was

only reliving the events of the past, and that nothing he could have done would have changed the outcome. He took hold of Kirk firmly.

"Jim, I want you to listen to me. Kalinth recreated these images to make you suffer. They're not real. Nothing you could have done would have changed things. David would still have died. Do you understand?"

Kirk recoiled from the Doctor's grasp, pulling his knees in towards his chest in a sign of withdrawal. "Leave me alone, Bones, I'm tired... so tired. I just want to sleep."

McCoy frowned and reached for his mediscanner quickly. He passed it over Kirk's body and studied the readings.

"What's the matter Doctor? Didn't the Captain like my little surprise? Now he knows what it feels like to lose someone that you care for."

Kalith laughed loudly, completely absorbed with the success of her exploits. She was so engrossed that she didn't notice Spock slowly move around to stand level with her. Choosing a suitably sized boulder from the ground, he slowly picked it up and turned it over in his hand. He only had one chance and he knew that he would have to be sure of his mark. Mentally he prepared himself, then spoke softly and calmly.

"Kalith."

She turned quickly at the sound, and raised her disruptor instinctively when she saw that Spock had moved. The Vulcan's arm whipped out fiercely, unleashing the rock with tremendous force. Kalith aimed and squeezed the trigger in the same instant that the rock hit her square on the forehead. The force threw her backwards and she fell

stunned. The disruptor beam missed Spock by inches, and struck the tree to his left, sending splinters of wood in all directions.

He raced over to where the fallen figure lay amongst the dirt and debris, and checked for signs of life. Spock again found himself trying to control his conflicting emotions. One side of him felt relief that the Klingon was still alive and able to stand trial for her actions, but another side of him wished that the rock had hit with a fatal blow, for the torture that she had made Kirk endure. Controlling the strong primitive emotion to kill the Klingon where she lay, he started to search for the phial of antidote. He checked all of Kalinith's many pockets and the utility belt that she carried, all without success.

He sat back on his haunches and tried to think of a place where she might have hidden it. He was convinced that she would have had it with her; she was too conceited and confident to do otherwise. As he looked around him, he asked himself the question, *Where would she hide it?* His eyes came to rest on the console at which she had been standing. He rose quickly and walked over to the pedestal.

There on the top, next to the control pad that Kalinith had used to create the holo projection, was a small glass phial filled with a colourless liquid. Snatching it up quickly, he ran across to where McCoy was still bent over the still figure of Kirk.

"Doctor, I have found the antidote. How is the Captain?"

McCoy took the phial and retrieved his medikit from where it lay. "I don't know, Spock. We may not have enough time. He's completely withdrawn into himself. Reliving David's death again

was too much for him to cope with. Even if we've got the antidote in time, I'm afraid that Jim might have lost the will to live."

Spock looked at the small figure as he lay huddled amongst the rocks. He could not display any outward emotions, but what he felt for this man could not be put into words. He knew that McCoy understood the friendship that he and Kirk shared, and did not feel awkward in the knowledge that the Doctor would be witness to the action that he knew he must take in order to save Jim's life and give him back the will to live.

"Doctor McCoy, if you will take care of preparing the antidote, I will try and reach Jim and bring him back to us."

McCoy nodded, knowing that Spock was their only hope for pulling Jim back from his deep despair.

"Okay, Spock. I'll be right here if you need my help."

Spock knelt down beside Kirk and reached for the contact points for a deep mindmeld. He entered Jim's mind easily and started to pass slowly through the many levels, searching for his friend's consciousness. It was dark and cold, and Spock had to fight back the rising fear that he was indeed too late. Desperately he moved on; deeper and deeper he went, oblivious of the fact that he might not be able to retrace his path.

Suddenly he felt Kirk's consciousness, faint but definitely still there. Spock reached out towards it.

Jim, it is I, Spock, your friend. Come with me and I will lead you to safety.

After a moment of silence, Spock heard the faint weak response.

No. Go away, leave me alone. I'm tired... I just want to sleep.

You can sleep, Jim, but not here. I will show you a safe place to sleep.

I want to stay with David. I won't leave him, not again. Let me be with him, please.

Desperately Spock continued, determined to bring Kirk back.

I cannot allow you to stay with David, Jim. David has gone, he is not here.

Gone... where? I'm all alone? Let me sleep, please. I'm so tired.

Spock could feel Kirk's consciousness fade as his life forces diminished. He reached out once more.

Jim, you are not alone, you will never be alone. Your family need you. I forbid you to leave us.

My family? Realisation began to dawn on Kirk slowly, as he became aware of the strong forceful voice.

Spock, is that you? Is Bones with you? Where am I?

You will be all right, Jim. I am here, Bones is here. Follow me and I will show you.

Spock joined with Kirk's consciousness and slowly led him, like a small child, back through the levels of his mind. Like a frightened boy Kirk spoke to Spock through the meld.

Spock, stay with me, don't leave me alone. I feel so cold.

I will not leave you, Jim. You will always be able to reach out to me. Now rest - we are almost there.

Spock felt Kirk relax with the knowledge that he was being led to safety. As he negotiated the upper levels of his mind he heard Kirk say,

Goodbye, David... I love you, and I'm sorry.

Chapter 19

McCoy was monitoring Kirk's lifesigns. The readings were well below normal. His blood pressure was too low by far and his heart rate nearly non-existent. The antidote had been administered as soon as Spock had found it, but Kirk was still showing no signs of recovery.

Spock remained motionless, bent solemnly over the still form, his hands pressed firmly against Kirk's temples. McCoy noted the shallow breathing and the pallor of the Vulcan's skin. His eyes were shut tight with the effort needed to maintain the link. McCoy was concerned for the Vulcan, knowing that he would readily sacrifice his own life to save Kirk, a fact which had been proven on more than one occasion.

He reached out to try and break Spock's concentration, and then stopped. The readings from the mediscanner fluctuated as Kirk's heart rate started to increase. Slowly his blood pressure rose to a more acceptable level, and McCoy could see the steady rise and fall of Kirk's chest for the first time since his collapse. As the indicators beeped to hail the slow return of all vital signs to more acceptable levels, it became apparent that Spock had successfully managed to reach Kirk and convince him that there was something to live for.

Slowly Spock opened his eyes and withdrew from the meld. McCoy was

standing ready to catch him as he slumped forward, exhausted from his ordeal.

"Spock, are you all right?"

The Vulcan did not answer the Doctor straight away. He stood, silently summoning all his mental disciplines in an attempt to regain his composure. Presently he released himself from McCoy's grasp and sat back, leaning against a nearby rock.

"I am all right now, Doctor. Just tired."

McCoy satisfied himself that Spock was indeed only suffering from exhaustion, and then rechecked Kirk's vital signs.

"Well whatever you did, Spock, it worked. Jim's out of immediate danger, but I need to get him back to the Enterprise quickly."

Wearily, Spock rose and moved across to the computer console, stopping to retrieve Kalin's disruptor from the spot where it had fallen. After a few moments he found the button that would cancel the current program and pressed it. The Genesis Planet vanished and was immediately replaced by the still quietness of the empty room.

Spock activated the door release before moving towards the exit, and beckoned to the Security guard still waiting at the turbolift. He issued instructions for the young ensign to contact the Enterprise and have a medical team standing by to meet them in the Transporter room. He also requested a Security detail to take Kalin into custody.

When Spock returned to McCoy's side the Captain was starting to regain

consciousness. He opened his eyes slowly to find McCoy smiling back down at him. He moved his head slightly to look towards Spock. He smiled at both of them with a great effort and whispered the words, "Thank you."

His eyelids closed slowly and he fell into an exhausted sleep. Spock moved to hold Kirk's hand, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by McCoy.

"Will he be all right, Doctor?"

McCoy looked across at Spock, seeing for the first time the strain that covered his features.

"Well, he's out of immediate danger. We managed to get to the antidote in time, although the side effects from the poison may make him feel quite ill for a while. Nothing to worry about, though. His superficial injuries will heal in time, but he'll need a lot of rest. What I'm most concerned about is his mental state, and I won't know how all this," he gestured around him, "has affected him until we get him back on the Enterprise, and he has had a chance to recuperate."

Seeing the look of concern on Spock's face, he reached out his hand and placed it on the Vulcan's shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, Spock. Jim is tough; together we'll help him overcome this experience."

McCoy looked at Spock for a response but the Vulcan was silent, the strain of the mindmeld finally catching up with him. Noticing the extra lines of strain under his eyes, McCoy added, "I suggest you get some rest yourself when we get back to the Enterprise. Jim will need you when he wakes up, and you're not going to be much good to him if you're dead on your feet."

Spock stood slowly as he saw the

Security detail coming towards them. It would not be long now before they were all back on the Enterprise, and they could put this experience behind them. He looked back down at the sleeping figure as he said, "Very well, Doctor. And thank you - from both of us."

Without waiting for an answer he turned and was gone.

Chapter 20

Three weeks later.

"Medical log, Stardate: 8413.1

"Captain Kirk's recovery has been slow but steady. The antidote, although administered late, has neutralized the poisonous compounds effectively. Once on board the Enterprise a full transfusion reduced the risk of any residual amounts remaining within his blood stream. The physical injuries that were sustained both as a result of the initial attack and the subsequent encounter during the search for the antidote have all been treated and are healing satisfactorily.

"My one remaining concern is the effects that the recent events have had on the Captain's mental state. Since his return to the ship he has been very subdued and depressed. So far all my attempts to try and get him to open up have met with resistance and a total denial that anything is the matter. As we are now en route back to Earth I have released him from Sickbay on light duties, and will continue to

evaluate his progress."

McCoy switched off his medical log and sat in silence as he tried to figure out a way of approaching Kirk and tackling him on the subject of his reticent mood. The Doctor knew that Kirk's current demeanour had something to do with his son's death and the subsequent nightmares that he had been experiencing. McCoy sighed as he remembered how much trouble he had had in trying to get Jim to admit that there was a problem, and then to convince him that he could be helped to accept his loss. The recent events had destroyed any headway that McCoy had made earlier and he knew that he would need to approach Kirk afresh and try and get him to open up once more.

The decision made, McCoy tidied his desk and rose to leave, aware that he would need to remain attentive to Kirk and pick his moment carefully.

Kirk sat behind a stack of computer tapes, requisitions, personnel transfers, new assignments and reports, all waiting for his signature and approval. He wondered how McCoy could think that paperwork was less strenuous than Bridge duty, but dismissed the idea of questioning him on the subject, knowing that he might find himself back in Sickbay.

Since his release from Sickbay both Spock and McCoy had made sure that he didn't get bored or over-exert himself. He was not allowed to spend much time by himself and he couldn't decide whether his two friends were just being over-protective or cautious, for fear that he might do something irrational.

Admittedly he had not experienced the same excitement that the challenge of returning to duty normally brought. His enthusiasm had gone, and he found himself quite content to sift through the backlog of tapes. Kirk found it difficult to admit to himself that he had lost a lot more than a son when he beamed back from Genesis.

McCoy obviously knew that something was troubling him, and Kirk wondered why he had not been able to confide in the Doctor. Reluctantly, he realized that McCoy would get at the truth sooner or later, and he found himself dreading their inevitable confrontation.

Several days later Kirk stood at one of the viewing windows on the Observation Deck and looked out at the sight of Earth growing large as they made their final approach to Space Dock. This was his favourite place on the ship, and he always retreated here when he needed to be alone. As Kirk stared out at the large globe that filled the window he wondered why he did not feel the same excitement and anticipation that usually accompanied the thought of shore leave.

Kirk was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he did not hear the door open and shut behind him, nor did he sense the silent approach of the figure that had entered. McCoy stood quietly for a moment looking at Kirk as he leant against the upright bulkhead support. To the Doctor's professional eye the man who now stood before him was deeply distressed about something. Allowing Kirk time to sort out his problems had not worked, and he had decided to approach him once more, determined to find out what was troubling him.

McCoy walked over to stand next to

Kirk and gestured out of the window. "It's beautiful, isn't it? You know, there's always something special about the sight of good ol' Earth."

Without turning to acknowledge the Doctor's presence, Kirk nodded slightly. "Yes, I suppose you're right," he said unenthusiastically.

McCoy continued, unperturbed by Kirk's outward lack of interest, "Look, Jim, I came here for a reason. It's obvious to me that something is still upsetting you. Now I've given you enough time to come to terms with whatever is bothering you, but it apparently hasn't worked."

Kirk interrupted testily. "Bones, I'm sick of telling you and Spock that I'm okay. When will you stop...?"

McCoy waved his hand angrily and stabbed Kirk in the chest with his finger. "Oh, don't give me that bull again, Captain, because I don't believe you. I'm tired of playing Mr Nice Guy, trying to cajole you into talking to me. Now either we sit down here right now and you tell me what this is all about, or you accompany me to Sickbay and we'll stay there until you feel like talking. The choice is yours."

The look on Kirk's face made McCoy wish that he hadn't had to be so rough but he had to get him to open up. Evidently his determination had paid off, because Kirk turned towards him, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. McCoy took his arm and led him over to one of the seats nearby.

"C'mon, sit down and talk to me, please. I want to help, if you'll let me."

He keyed the sequence that would lock the door so that they wouldn't be disturbed and then sat opposite Kirk.

McCoy waited patiently, allowing Kirk the time to construct his thoughts. Eventually the Captain looked up into the Doctor's eyes.

"When I first joined Starfleet, Bones, I had only one dream, to become the Captain of a Starship. Nothing was going to come between me and my dream, nothing at all. When I eventually got the Enterprise, I was filled with such excitement with the realization that I had achieved my goal. Over the years I have never lost that feeling. She was my life, Bones. Take her away and there's nothing left. No family and no future."

He became silent and moved his gaze from McCoy to stare back out at the Earth.

"The loneliness never bothered me, though. I used to think that it wouldn't matter. I had everything that I had ever wanted. Every time I looked out at the stars I was filled with a sense of belonging. My destiny was out there and I relished the chance to explore."

A sudden sadness crept into his voice, "But I don't know any more. The excitement and enthusiasm for command is no longer there. I don't even know who I am any more, and I've started to doubt myself and my desire to command."

McCoy looked over at Kirk, slowly beginning to understand the depth of his despair. Reaching out a hand to comfort him he said, "Jim, you're being too hard on yourself. You've been through a lot recently, and it'll take time for the mental wounds to heal. You're bound to feel confused and disorientated, but it'll pass. Trust me."

Kirk snapped his head around to stare back at the Doctor accusingly. "Will it, Bones? Can you honestly guarantee

that things will get back to normal, back to the way they were?"

He stood and moved away, rebuffing the comforting hand that McCoy had offered. Almost in a whisper, Kirk continued, "I lost a son, Bones, a son I hadn't seen since he was a boy. Seeing David made me realise how much I had sacrificed over the years in my selfish determination for self satisfaction. Now he's gone I realise how lonely my life really is."

McCoy looked at Kirk thoughtfully, trying to think of a way that he could make him understand the reason for his doubts and his guilt.

"Let me ask you a question, Jim."

"Go ahead," Kirk replied.

"If Carol had asked you to stay with her, would you have resigned your commission and joined her?"

Kirk thought for a moment and then frowned. "I can't answer that, Bones; I don't know."

"Oh I think you do, if you're honest with yourself," McCoy replied steadily.

Kirk walked back to the large window and watched as the Enterprise made her final approach towards the waiting Space Dock doors. After a few minutes he turned from the view and looked back at McCoy.

"No, I don't think I would have," he answered quietly. "We used to talk about the possibility of marriage but neither one of us wanted to give up our chosen careers. That's why the relationship came to nothing. I suppose in a way that's why Carol never brought the subject up. She didn't want to force a decision on me."

McCoy nodded, seeing the breakthrough that he had been waiting for. "So even if you had been given the chance to settle as a family you wouldn't have been willing to sacrifice your career for their sakes."

"No, but she never even told him about me, Bones. I think that hurts more than anything. The fact that he never knew who his father was." Kirk looked at McCoy with the look of someone who had suddenly realized a deep wanting.

The barrier that McCoy had created to shield himself from Kirk's emotions was in danger of collapsing when he saw the look of utter despair that appeared in his friend's eyes. With great resolve he continued, feeling that he had to press Kirk even further.

"And you think that would have helped him? Knowing who his father was but never actually seeing him, or when he did only for short visits? Carol did what she felt was best for David at the time."

Kirk slumped forlornly into a nearby chair. "I know you're right, Bones, but it doesn't help. When I first saw David after we beamed down to Genesis, I felt so..." Kirk searched for a word, "so... whole. I was still getting used to the idea of having him around when he was taken away from me."

Kirk stared silently across the room towards the window, deep in thought. "When Sam and Aurelan died, I felt that it was my duty to take care of their son Peter. But now, he is settled and grown up. I feel my obligation to him is over. David gave me a sense of purpose again, but now he's gone and I'm on my own once more." Kirk's voice trailed off as he fought to control his emotions.

The Doctor moved slowly over to

Kirk and knelt down in front of him. He reached out and placed his hands on Kirk's shoulders.

"Listen to me, Jim," he said softly. "Your emotions are in turmoil. You feel bitterness towards Carol for not telling David who his father was, and you're crucifying yourself with guilt for not being able to take an active role in his growing up. In your depression you've started to question your own lifestyle and all the mistakes that you've made along the way. You've even started to question your decision to join Starfleet. You can't help being the man that you are, and you certainly can't change him."

He paused to give Kirk time to digest what he had just said. "You're wrong when you say that you're on your own. You're not alone, and you never will be. Your position as Captain on this ship means that you have to remain detached from the crew. You've never allowed yourself to become close to anyone for fear that it might interfere with a command decision. But there are people on this ship who think of you as more than just a friend. They respect you, Jim, but more importantly they care about you. Each of us, for his or her own reasons, made a decision years ago to join Starfleet knowing that we could be sacrificing the possibility of a comfortable, predictable life. We have learned to live with each other and depend on each other like brothers and sisters. We are a family unit, each of us an integrated member. You've got a family, Jim, you just need time to realise it."

Kirk raised his head very slowly and looked into McCoy's eyes, his own vision becoming clouded with unshed tears. Minutes passed in silence as he pondered over the Doctor's words carefully. As the tears came, McCoy pulled Kirk towards him in a gentle

embrace and held him until he'd cried himself out.

Eventually Kirk pulled himself away from the Doctor's arms and sat back in his chair.

"Thanks, Bones; I'm glad that you were here."

McCoy rose and sat in a chair opposite Kirk, anxious to see how his friend would react. When the Captain had regained some of his composure the Doctor continued.

"Things have happened so fast over the last few months that you haven't had a chance to come to terms with your own feelings, Jim. Losing David brought back a lot of feelings that you had quite neatly locked away over the years for fear that they would interfere with your plans. Now that you're in the twilight years of your career most of your ambitions have been achieved and you find that you've got time to think about things other than the ship. But then you started to ask yourself, 'What else is there?' David's death only helped to magnify your feelings of loneliness and in your depression you've started to wonder whether you wish to continue with the life style that took all your attention and left you with no room for personal relationships."

Kirk stared silently out at the panoramic view as Space Dock drew ever nearer. McCoy's words had made him think, and he realised that there was a lot of truth in what the Doctor had said.

"Am I really getting so old, Bones, that my career is starting to become unimportant to me?"

McCoy sighed as he raised his arms

above his head and clasped his hands together as he cradled the back of his neck. "No, I don't think so. You're just suffering from a type of delayed shock, of sorts."

Kirk snapped his head around questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"Your command has given you everything that you've ever wanted, and you've been very successful and content with the way your career has advanced."

Kirk nodded impatiently as he rose and walked over to stand in front of the large window. "Yes, so what?"

"When you lost Spock it was the first time that you'd ever had to accept the death of someone that you had grown close too. You looked upon him as a brother and his death hurt you deeply. All of a sudden you were alone, no family that you could speak of. Subconsciously, you started to blame Starfleet, not only for taking away the one person who really meant anything to you, but also for taking so much of your own life, leaving you with no time to start a family of your own. You became so obsessed with this thought that you could not, or would not, accept the fact that all your career and personal decisions had been made freely by yourself.

"When David came onto the scene you temporarily shoved these thoughts to the back of your mind. You had a son, a family again, and the feelings of loneliness and blame suddenly disappeared. When he died all those pent-up emotions surfaced, so much so that you just couldn't cope. Jim, these feelings will pass, but you've got to talk about them. Don't try to contain them, to pretend that they're not important, because they are. Just remember that you are not alone; you never were and you never will be."

Several minutes passed in silence while Kirk considered the Doctor's words. McCoy started to become concerned when Kirk made no attempt to move from his spot by the window. He wondered whether he had read the situation wrong, and that perhaps he shouldn't have been so forthcoming with his analysis. He relaxed slightly when Kirk slowly turned towards him, a faint smile playing across his face.

McCoy looked questioningly at the Captain. "Are you all right, Jim?"

Kirk nodded as he walked back towards the centre of the room and to his friend. "Yes Bones, I think I will be. I know I seem to be doing this a lot lately, but thanks again, for everything."

McCoy reached out a hand and slapped Kirk squarely on the shoulder. The look in Kirk's eyes told the Doctor everything that he needed to know, and he realised that Kirk would indeed be all right.

"C'mon, I think it's about time I treated you to a glass of an old brandy that I've been saving. Who knows, we could even chat over old times and maybe even get drunk."

Kirk laughed softly, the relief evident in his voice. "Sounds good to me."

As they turned to leave McCoy added lightly, "And afterwards we can decide on a place to take Spock for shore leave. I'm looking forward to a few weeks of rest and relaxation, and a chance to get one over on that Vulcan. I hear Yosemite is great at this time of year."

Kirk laughed softly. "If you can get Spock to come camping with us then you're a better man than I am."

As they passed through the door McCoy smiled, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Well you know me, Jim. I love a challenge!"



LOVE, HONOUR, DUTY

Love.

Perhaps one of the strongest emotions known to mankind,
It can be both a pleasure and a pain,
A strength and a weakness.
For love, a person will do many things
That they would not normally do.
It can make a person willing to lay down his life
For his friends and loved ones.
Love is what we feel for each other -
Although we might not admit it out loud -
For, although we are from different planets,
We have become friends and brothers,
And together, we travel the stars.

Honour.

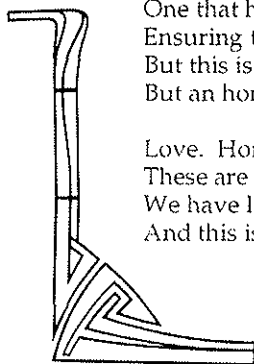
We honour each other's beliefs and customs;
Together we have learned to understand and accept
Each other's differences.
For you are Vulcan and I am Terran,
And, although we have been brought up on different planets,
Both of us have a similar code of honour,
And we always try to live by it;
But we are also prepared to die by it.
Our honour is important to us,
And each of us would do his best,
To protect the honour of the other.

Duty.

Our duty is to the Federation and Starfleet;
We are sworn to protect the people within the Federation,
From any who would harm them.
It is also our duty to ensure the freedom
Of all the beings within the Federation.
Yet we also have a duty to each other -
One that has us watching over each other
Ensuring that the other is safe and well.
But this is one duty that is not considered a duty,
But an honour and a pleasure.

Love. Honour. Duty.

These are the things by which
We have lived our lives.
And this is how we will continue to do so.



Christine J Jones

GET HIM TO THE MEDICAL ON TIME

by

Tracy Beadle and Nina Lynch

Dr McCoy was not in the best of moods; he never was when he had the crew's medicals to do. This time, though, Starfleet had imposed a deadline, which did nothing to help. Now all he had to do was to locate Mr Spock, and he was finished. Mr Spock, however, was being as hard to find as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

McCoy rushed out of the turbolift and nearly collided with the elusive First Officer.

"Ah, Mr Spock - just the person I've been looking for."

"Indeed, Doctor?"

"Have you been avoiding me?" challenged McCoy.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Dr McCoy, your place is in Sickbay, mine is on the Bridge; as they are totally different parts of the Enterprise, 'avoiding' is hardly the word."

That did it. McCoy's patience snapped. "Why, you pointy-eared hobgoblin! I've left messages for you in your quarters, on the Bridge, in the rec room, the computer library, the transporter room, and in Engineering. You've ignored every one of them."

"I have not ignored them," Spock replied. "You asked me to report to Sickbay when it was convenient. It is not, as yet, convenient."

McCoy moved to block Spock's exit. "You know exactly what I mean. I want you in Sickbay for a full medical in ten

minutes."

"I am due on the Bridge in ten minutes," sighed Spock.

"I told them you'd be late."

Mr Spock stared at McCoy. As Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, McCoy had the authority, if it was necessary, to order anyone for a medical, but something in Spock wanted to delay that act.

"I fail to understand your urgency." McCoy tried to reply, but Spock continued, "Your inability to organise your timetable to maximum efficiency has been a source of constant amazement to me."

"You know damn well why it's urgent!" McCoy exploded. "Yours is the last medical to be completed. The full report is then sent to Starfleet, and allowing for sub-space delay, I've only one hour left to do so."

If Spock could have experienced the emotion of joy, it would have been then. While he still had the upper hand he replied, "Surely even you can locate the results of my previous medical in your data banks."

"Yes, but I now need to re-evaluate the effects of Tri-ampholene on your system after the six month trial period."

"I found it unpleasant, but beneficial."

Had McCoy heard correctly? Had

Spock said he *liked* something? With a glance towards the heavens McCoy murmured, "My god, I've pleased a Vulcan!"

Once again McCoy had misinterpreted what Spock meant. "I am unable to be pleased," he explained. "I am merely stating the fact that I found it compensates for the density of the air while I am aboard ship."

"That stuff's like fuel. If the dilithium crystals were to fail, three drops would get us going again."

"Hardly, Doctor." Spock knew McCoy should be able to grasp the basic concepts of dilithium and warp physics, so he decided to explain further. "Since the life expectancy of a crystal of dilithium is in direct proportion to the co-efficient energy potential..."

"Can't you take a joke, you wooden tree sprite?"

Remembering past conversations, Spock replied, "Ah yes, a joke. A story with a humorous climax."

Time was running out, and McCoy still had to perform the medical.

"Stop avoiding the issue," he demanded. "I'm still waiting, and my patience is running out."

"Your patient is standing here."

"My patient is trying my patience, and if my patient doesn't report to Sickbay immediately, I'll do it here and now!"

While McCoy was speaking a young ensign walked by. She was new to the Enterprise, and she couldn't help but stare as she saw the two senior officers arguing in the corridor. McCoy glared at her. Spock, however, took the initiative.

"I hope you don't expect to conduct my medical in the corridor?"

"Mr Spock, Sickbay, now," McCoy said, trying to control his temper.

"Dr McCoy..."

"Spock, Sickbay now!" McCoy was losing the battle with his temper.

"Dr McCoy..."

"NOW! before I start to invoke some Starfleet clauses of my own."

Spock knew that the Doctor had won. He turned towards Sickbay, Dr McCoy following eagerly. The only thing Spock could do now was to yield to the logic of the situation.



POSTSCRIPT : **LET THAT BE** **YOUR LAST BATTLEFIELD**

by

Teresa Abbott

End of shift. Dr Leonard 'Bones' McCoy made his way unhurriedly through the corridors of the Enterprise towards the Rec Room, mingling on the way with those personnel just coming off duty. He wasn't hungry, as he'd snatched a hurried sandwich some two hours previously in his Sickbay office, but he'd long since made it a habit to go and sit with the crew for a while in order to pick up the current atmosphere of the ship.

This was especially important after a difficult mission, like the one they'd just completed. McCoy knew that many of the crew, the juniors in particular, found the attitudes expressed by Lokai and Bele both incomprehensible and disturbing. It wouldn't do any harm to sit in and listen to the current gossip, and maybe offer the odd reassuring word or two.

Sulu and Chekov were in the queue before him at the food dispenser, and the Doctor smiled as he saw the enormous meal the Helmsman had ordered.

"What's this, Sulu?" McCoy clapped a friendly hand on the Helmsman's shoulder. "I thought you avoided all this junk food. Carry on like this and your fencing will feel the after-effects."

Sulu smiled back. "Doctor, a few hours ago I thought I'd never eat a meal again! I promised myself then that if the Captain pulled it off, I'd order myself the biggest dinner possible to celebrate."

genuinely puzzled. "I didn't think that the ship had been in any particular danger."

Sulu stared at him, wide-eyed. "The Captain commenced the self-destruct sequence on the Bridge. I didn't think he'd go through with it, but when it got to the last ten seconds..."

"I haf never felt so vorried!" Chekov broke in excitedly, anxiety making his accent more pronounced. "My palms were sveating."

Not for the first time, McCoy was grateful for his custom of sounding out the crew. "Tell me about it," he asked, and they did so, most volubly.

After they'd gone to their table McCoy collected a drink and looked round for somewhere to sit, finally making his way over to where Scott was eating.

"Mind if I join you? I hear there was a bit of a drama on the Bridge earlier on. Want to talk about it?"

The Engineer shook his head. "I'm sure ye've heard all the details already. I canna pretend I wasna worried. As for the Captain - well, he never batted an eyelid. I'd like tae think that I didna let him down, and gave my part of the order without hesitatin'. But it makes ye think..."

"Pulled what off?" McCoy was

It did indeed. McCoy stared into his

drink and analysed his own feelings. Working backwards, he estimated that at the time of the incident he'd been performing a minor operation on an ensign who'd fallen on some glass in one of the laboratories. A commonplace procedure - and yet his own life, and the lives of all of the crew, could have ended at that moment without any of them having any say in the matter.

The Doctor shuddered, and then shrugged philosophically. It was the way of the service. Someone had to be in charge. McCoy was comforted by the realisation that although he had had some disagreements with the Captain in the past, there was no-one he trusted more than Kirk to make that ultimate decision. If the Captain had ordered the destruct sequence there must have been a very good reason, and the Bridge crew's unhesitating support - even admiration in Sulu's case - said a lot about Kirk's leadership.

But were *was* the Captain? McCoy realised belatedly that Kirk himself hadn't told him of the incident, or even been to see him since the shift ended.

Finishing his drink, the Doctor excused himself from Scott's table and left the Rec Room, almost bumping into Spock in the corridor.

"What's all this about a destruct order on the Bridge?" McCoy noticed that his own manner had become more belligerent, and wondered - not for the first time - why the Vulcan had that effect on him. "Why didn't someone tell me about it?"

Spock pulled up short, surprised by the Doctor's annoyance. "There was nothing to tell. The Captain acted in the only logical manner open to him, and the situation resolved itself satisfactorily. It was just another routine incident."

"I see." McCoy knew then what was troubling him. "And do you think that Jim will see it as just another routine incident, Spock?"

After a moment the Vulcan raised a thoughtful eyebrow. The Doctor's insight into Human reactions never failed to surprise him.

"I admit to not having thought of that possibility," he said finally, quietly. "Jim may indeed have taken this badly. Perhaps...?"

The Doctor nodded, his anger defused by their mutual acceptance of their Captain's need. "I'll go and talk to him."

When he didn't find Kirk in the Captain's quarters McCoy made his way unerringly to the Observation Deck. The door slid shut behind him and he crossed to the large viewscreen, not ordering on the lights, for the dim illumination from the stars outside was all that was needed.

The Captain was there, as he had expected, a solitary figure in the semi-darkness, isolated from the hustle and bustle of life on the rest of the ship. McCoy moved to his side but didn't speak. Banalities were inappropriate, for they both knew why he had come.

After a long while in silence Kirk spoke softly. "Beautiful, isn't it? I've seen it a thousand times, and it still captivates me."

He drew a long shuddering breath then reached out his hand to touch the smooth coldness of the ship's wall. "I almost destroyed her, Bones. Another second and it would have been too late. You and Spock. The Enterprise. All four

hundred of her crew. I see all their faces day after day in the corridors, trusting me, and yet today I nearly killed them all."

McCoy spoke reassuringly into the silence. "From what I hear, Jim, you had no other choice. The crew are certainly fully behind your action. Even Spock said it was the only logical decision you could've made, and from him that's certainly a compliment."

Kirk smiled bitterly. "Is it? Spock still sees things too much in black and white instead of grey. Why *did* I start the self-destruct sequence? When the Kelvans took control of the ship, and Spock and Scotty rigged up a device which would destroy her at my command, I couldn't do it. And yet today Bele set up a challenge to my authority and I gambled 400 lives to outsmart him."

McCoy frowned. A certain amount of self-analysis was helpful, but it was unlike Kirk to dwell so much on a decision.

"Jim, each situation is different. There were a billion lives at stake on Ariannus today. When the Kelvans took

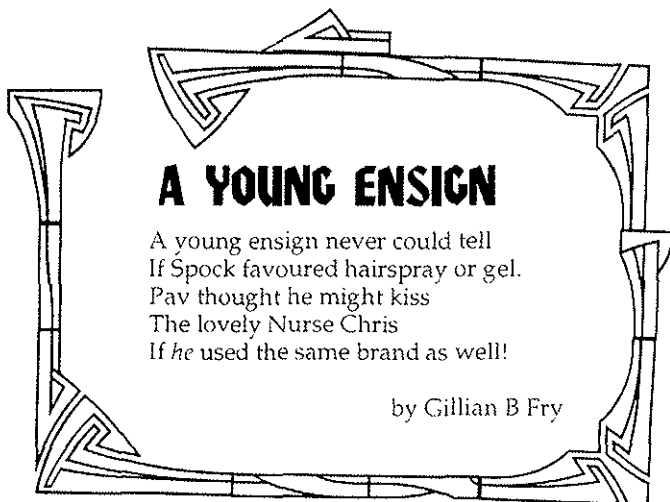
over the ship, the risk was only to ourselves. Be thankful that you had the strength of character to make a decision, and that although the decisions were different each time, they worked out for the best. Now why don't you come to the Rec Room with me and get a bite to eat."

Finally, then, Kirk smiled and ordered on the lights, and as he did so it seemed as if the darkness outside the ship fell away.

"You're right, Bones, of course. It just shook me how suddenly the situation developed. And it made me afraid that one day I might really have to give the order to destroy the Enterprise, and there'll be no going back. I don't know if I could live without her."

"Rubbish!" McCoy ushered him briskly from the room. "You're just tired and need a rest. This ship will probably outlast all of us, you'll see."

But as he followed the Captain out into the corridor a chill crept up his back, and he tried to dismiss as superstitious nonsense the coldness that had come over him at Kirk's last words.



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

by

David Gallagher

The strange Vulcan walked sure-footedly across the icy tundra, deep in thought. He had had a dream - a vision. Now he knew his purpose in this life. It fell to him to find it. He would be the first, but many more would follow.

SHA-KA-REE!

At last he knew where it was, and how to get there. All he needed now was a plan - and then there was the small problem of how to get his hands in a Starship. He needed to think...

He stopped walking when he found a spot to his liking and sat, cross-legged, on the ice, then proceeded to cut a roughly circular hole through the ice. Once this was accomplished he cast the line of his rod into the hole. He needed to collect his thoughts, to clear his mind, to meditate, and he always found it easier to think while he was fishing.

How illogical! But then... *this* Vulcan was not ruled by logic.

His meditation slowly developed into a fitful doze, from which he was woken with a start by a booming, disembodied voice which announced authoritatively,

"THERE ARE NO FISH DOWN THERE!"

Wide-eyed with amazement, Sybok looked around, but there was nobody there and nothing to be seen. With a wry chuckle he settled back down and returned his attention to his fishing rod.

Just as he was about to dismiss the whole incident as being due to an overactive imagination - and a large cheese sandwich he had had earlier - the disembodied voice returned and once again declared,

"THERE ARE NO FISH DOWN THERE!"

Sybok jumped to his feet, letting the fishing rod fall, his eyes feverishly searching the darkness all around him. At last, after some moments, he found his voice and called into the air, "Why... How do you know this? Are you... are you God?"

And the voice answered,

"NO - I AM THE MANAGER OF THE ICE RINK!"



THE HELMSMAN

The Helmsman was very enthused,
But his Captain was far from amused.
Sulu parried his foil,
Forcing Kirk to recoil -
Dumas would have been *very* confused!



by Gillian B Fry

WRITTEN BY THE WINNERS

by

Jeremy S.C. Broadribb

Kirk stared disbelievingly at Admiral Komack's image in the viewer.

"They want to do *what*?" he demanded.

Komack shrugged. "Once the device's existence came to the notice of historians, it was only a matter of time before they talked someone with the influence into getting them access to it. They got it, and the Enterprise has been given the job of transporting two of them to the Forever Planet."

"Sir, just *how* did it come to their notice in the first place?"

"Freedom of information, Captain. Your reports and records are available to anyone with sufficient access rights. Someone had them and read about the Guardian of Forever."

"Did they also read about the dangers of altering history, endangering their own, and everyone else's, existence?"

"Not with too much concern, obviously. They probably don't think it would apply to them because they know how history's supposed to run."

Kirk shook his head. "How do they know what effects their actions could have? They could step on an insect and change the outcome of a war or scientific discovery without even realising what caused it. Admiral, if you ask me, this is foolhardy. The risks are not justified by any possible benefits to historical accuracy."

Komack looked Kirk in the eyes. "Captain, I'm not asking you. Those are your orders and you are expected to carry them out. You will proceed to Starbase Six, collect Dr. Harbin and Dr. McMahon and transport them to the Forever Planet. There, you and your crew will assist them in their researches and you will arrange supervision of their actions if they do use the Guardian to travel in time."

"I understand that, Admiral. I just wanted my reservations known."

"Reservations noted, Captain. Just be under way as soon as possible," Komack replied levelly. "And Captain..."

"Yes, sir?" Kirk asked dispiritedly.

"My reservations didn't change anything either, Jim. Starfleet out."

Kirk turned away from the viewer and looked at the microtape the slot had disgorged. It refused to dissolve away, however badly he wanted it to. He turned back to the viewer and thumbed the control switch.

"This is the Captain. All department heads report to the briefing room. Navigator, set course for Starbase 6. Helm, warp five. Kirk out."

"They've got to be crazy!" McCoy broke the silence following Kirk's briefing.

"I take it you're not referring to senior Starfleet personnel, Doctor?" Kirk

asked sardonically.

"Whoever agreed to this needs their head examined," McCoy replied. "You know what could happen if they go back in time - hell, we both know it from experience!"

Kirk looked at him sharply and even Spock appeared to frown at the doctor.

"Sorry, Jim, but you know what I mean."

Kirk nodded. "Only too well, Bones, but it's not our decision. Spock, I'll want you to command the landing-party that accompanies the researchers, but you are not to go through the Guardian with them.

"Lt. Crawford," Kirk addressed a fair-haired officer sitting opposite him, "as ship's historian I'll expect you to take responsibility for these people if they do go through the Guardian. Personally, I hope they don't, but I doubt if they'll travel to the Forever Planet just to watch."

Crawford nodded. "Understood, Captain. Will we need any Security?" she asked.

"The more people who go back, the greater the chances of someone changing the past," Kirk replied. "Take your phaser and a class two tricorder - camouflaged as something that blends in with the period. Keep your phaser set on stun at all times and make sure it stays in your possession."

"A phaser, Captain?" Spock queried. "Surely the risk..."

"If locked on stun, the risk will be minimised. I want you, Lt. Crawford, to use it if your lives are endangered and stunning your attacker will not cause

death or disruption. You should not allow yourself to be seen using it. As a matter of fact, the only time you should really use it is if one of the researchers starts to become more than an observer and won't listen to reason."

Crawford smiled wryly. "What period of history do they want to observe, sir?"

Kirk grimaced. "That's probably the worst of it, Lieutenant. They want to study the time of the Eugenics War."

"That's insane!" McCoy exclaimed. "They don't know enough about that era to be sure they weren't causing disruption. Humanity just made it through that war - it would only take a small shift in the balance and none of us would be here, along with the last eleven or twelve generations of Homo Sapiens. If someone at Starfleet allowed this..."

"Look on the bright side, Bones," Kirk interrupted. "We'll never know if they were wrong."

Dr. Daniel Harbin proved to be a man of average height and build in his late forties, dark of eyes and what remained of his hair. Dr. Iain McMahon, tall, heavy-set and a youthful thirty-eight years old, could hardly have been more different from his colleague, a mop of red hair and piercing blue eyes completing the effect.

McCoy had insisted on subjecting them both to a thorough medical examination, despite their providing full medical histories on arrival. Once the doctor had satisfied himself that they wouldn't be contaminating the past with any diseases it didn't already have, they were given the standard tour of the Enterprise by Chekov. After the Russian

had whisked them around the ship with almost-indecent haste, the historians were left to discuss their plans with Crawford and Spock.

"We'll just be *observing* the past, Mr. Spock," McMahon insisted.

"From within it, sir," the Vulcan pointed out. "You would be able to see, hear, smell, taste and, most importantly, to touch the past. That last would enable you to change the course of history."

"What could we possibly do that would have so dramatic an effect?" Harbin demanded.

"What indeed?" Lesley Crawford asked. "Suppose a visitor from the future had crushed the first silk moth, if he'd gone back that far, or turned up in Roger Bacon's cell and convinced the other monks of his sorcery? You don't have to find a major player and hand him or her the secrets of warp drive. Save a child from drowning and you may save the person who helps Colonel Green destroy the World Confederation. Cause a soldier in a trench in 1917 to turn his head slightly and someone else could be member number seven of the National Socialist Party in 1923. If we go through the Guardian, we go as solid people, capable of inflicting damage on the fabric of history."

"You've made your point, Lieutenant," Harbin acknowledged. "However, you must appreciate that a gateway to the past like this one is a valuable research tool."

"So is an anti-matter processor," replied Spock. "Mishandled, however, it can unleash destruction on a massive scale. You will be dealing with something with a far greater potential for destruction."

"History? Destructive?" McMahon asked disbelievingly.

"You've studied it, Dr. McMahon," Crawford observed. "I think you'll agree that history and time can produce a lot of destruction."

"If not handled properly," McMahon added. "Who better than historians to handle history?"

"You've already decided to go through the Guardian," Crawford said. "That means I have to go with you. That being so, I want something made clear."

"You two are the experts on the history. I'm just a ship's historian, with a little knowledge of everyone's history. But when it comes to any aspects of possible interference, it's my responsibility to prevent it and you'll follow my lead. I don't intend to let anyone jeopardise the existence of myself, my friends or all our ancestors. Is that clear?"

The historians nodded, although McMahon looked unhappy. Crawford looked at Spock, who raised an eyebrow, but looked approving.

"Very well," Spock informed them. "I shall inform the Captain that the landing-party is to be equipped with suitable clothing and equipment. I suggest that all of you revise your knowledge of the period of history to which you will be travelling. We shall arrive at the Forever Planet in approximately seventy-eight hours and you will need to be fully prepared by that time." He stood up and the others followed suit.

"Approaching the planet, Captain," Sulu reported.

"Maximum orbit for transporter operations, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered.

"Lt. Crawford reports her party is ready when we are, sir," Palmer told him.

"Spock, is your landing-party ready to beam down?"

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock answered. "Lt. Crawford, Dr. McMahon and Dr. Harbin have been provided with suitable clothing and standard emergency rations. In addition, Lt. Crawford has a class two tricorder disguised as a book and a phaser, locked on stun setting and disguised as a pocket lamp."

"Let's hope she does better than the last ship's historian. Assemble the landing-party in the transporter room. I'll be right along."

"Lt. Uhura," Kirk addressed her, "you will remain in contact with the ship throughout the mission and report progress. If you should lose contact with us, try to establish what has happened. No doubt the Guardian will inform you if our history has been erased. In that event, Mr. Spock will assign a team to follow the research team into the past to try to restore history. If there is no sign of success within one hour, another team will follow."

"Lt. Crawford, you know what the risks are. Bear them in mind at all times - and Lieutenant..."

"Yes, Captain?" she asked.

"Please come back soon."

Crawford smiled. "It'll be a welcome return, sir."

"All right, prepare to beam down."

The landing-party assembled on the transporter platform and Spock turned to Kyle.

"Energise."

The transporter room faded away from around them and was replaced by the ruins on the Forever Planet, the giant ring of the Guardian at their centre. While Uhura reported in to the Enterprise, Spock approached the Guardian of Forever.

"Guardian, I am Commander Spock of the Starship Enterprise."

"You are known to us, as are those who accompany you. Do you wish me to be your gateway to your past?"

"We wish to send three people into past history. They wish to conduct research into a certain era."

"Then let them approach and prepare to make their journey. Behold..."

As Crawford, Harbin and McMahon stepped towards the Guardian, scenes from Earth history unfolded before their eyes. Lesley Crawford felt she could almost lip-read some of the words spoken as they passed rapidly by.

"Kill Darius. Kill Darius..."

"Truly, Meng Tiang, it will keep the barbarians out forever..."

"...the whole world wearing togas..."

"It's a good land, Cynric, and it's ours..."

"Tell my people that I live and will lead them against Guthrum..."

"Thorfinn, you're a liar, but a good storyteller..."

"Send my surgeon - I'll not fight the sick..."

"...excommunication. The heretics are to burn..."

"...and a King of England, too..."

"In the name of God, go - now!"

"...lero, lero, Lilibulero..."

"Frederick, learn to be a soldier..."

"From today, I am the revolution..."

"Well, it works, George, but where can it go?"

"Madam, what is the use..."

"It works! There they were, on that screen..."

"I think we'll call it Norun..."

"Only three cabinet posts. Von Papen?"

"I say we drop it. And again if we have to..."

"They've got a man up there..."

"We'll stop and search..."

"...pulling out, hurry!"

"...established himself in New Delhi."

"...and we have proof it wasn't the Russians..."

"Now!" That was Spock, signalling for them to jump through the Guardian. Crawford jumped as high as she could in her jeans and went through the hoop, Harbin and McMahon alongside her.

"Landing-party to Enterprise,"

Uhura signalled. "Are you receiving me?"

Crumbling masonry rose up before Crawford's eyes, then she went through it and landed easily on the ground beyond. The rubble and wreckage of shattered buildings surrounded her, wisps of dust still rising from a newly-fallen section. Harbin and McMahon, beside her, looked around in wonder.

"We're here," gasped Harbin. "We're actually here!"

"Lucky us," replied the Lieutenant. "Any idea where it is?"

McMahon looked about them, searching for any clues in the surrounding ruins. Few signs remained on any buildings, and none was intact. Harbin made out some lettering on some fallen brickwork.

"AX," he read out. "Anything spring to mind?"

"Could just be to do with taxes," replied McMahon. "They used to appropriate a substantial part of an individual's income in those days, before they taxed expenditure instead. Tax offices were widespread."

"How about 'IETY'?" Crawford asked.

"There are a lot of words ending with those letters," Harbin sighed. "Could be some church of piety - there were plenty of weird faiths then - or it could be a society of some description. It still doesn't tell us where we are. Let's look over there..."

"But behind me, remember," Crawford added firmly. "Let's get out of this ruin before any more of it falls in."

Stepping gingerly over the smaller pieces of rubble, they made their way to the edge of one wall, where Crawford peered around the corner. She led the others out of the building and into what had once been the main street of a medium-sized settlement. They made their way towards some structures that seemed still to be intact.

"It's odd that we're the only people here," Harbin commented.

"Is it?" Crawford asked. "I shouldn't think anyone would want to stay here."

"Yes, but there'd usually be someone retrieving possessions from the rubble or workmen clearing the site. That is, of course unless it was the result..."

"My tricorder shows only a slightly above-average background count," Crawford reassured him. "This wasn't a nuclear attack. The bio-scanner's showing some strange readings though..."

"You there!" a voice barked at them, distorted by a small speaker.

Several figures were advancing towards them. All were clad in white isolation suits and carried firearms as well as other equipment. The leader of the group was pointing at the research-party.

"Stay where you are!" the voice barked again. The white-suited group approached until Crawford could just see two eyes behind the protective mask of the leader.

"Just what the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. "Don't you know what those bastards dropped on this area?"

"Well, actually..." Harbin began. Crawford glared at him and he stopped.

"We were looking for some friends of ours," she told the man.

An amplified snort issued from the speaker in his mask. "If they were here when that lot came down, you're wasting your time as well as yourselves. If they weren't here, they'd have been kept out until the area's clean. That won't be for a long time. Where did you think you were going?"

"We thought they might be over..."

"If they are, you're not going to join them. We had few enough survivors from this attack without risking their lives again..."

"What do you mean?" McMahon interrupted.

"I mean you three fools carrying the bugs in among what's left of the population of Welwyn Garden City, that's what I mean..."

"A plague bomb!" Harbin gasped in horror.

The man nodded slowly. "Well, we certainly put up enough signs and barrier tape to warn you away. What's the matter - can't you read? Take them to the isolation section," he ordered his squad, motioning the historians forward with his pistol.

After what seemed a long march, they came to a series of sealed cubicles, which had clearly been erected after the attack. Connected to each cubicle was a profusion of supply ducts and machinery.

"In here," ordered the group leader, gesturing towards one of the cubicles.

The historians entered the cubicle, after which the door was closed and locked behind them. Through the

transparent screen in front of them, they could see the white-suited group enter through another door. The leader checked instrument readings before removing his mask and hood.

"Ahhh, that smells better," he declared. "Which is more than you should in a few days."

"What are you going to do with us?" Crawford asked.

"That depends on what the bugs do to you first. If they kill you, the floor will retract and the equipment underneath will do the rest."

"How soon will you know?"

"This particular little swine is usually fatal within three days of exposure, but we're required to take a week to make sure. Food will be provided through that chute to your left - you won't gain weight from it, but why waste food on the condemned? Some of us will check on you at regular intervals - to see how you're getting on."

"How many have you released after the week's up?" McMahon enquired nervously.

"You mean, so far? None. But we live in hope of someone being stronger than the disease. Now, I want your names and details. Ladies first - sorry we couldn't give you separate accommodation by the way."

"Lesley Crawford," she replied, wondering what he meant by the last remark. "Lieu... Lucerne Road, Guildford," she improvised.

"Anything else? N.I. number? Driving licence? Uh-huh, just like the rest of them - nothing to tell you from a hole in the ground, except your height.

How about you?" he asked Harbin.

"Daniel Harbin, er... Bedford Square, London..."

"Not recently, surely. Itinerant? Right, and you?"

"Iain McMahon, Fairfield Square, Wirral City..."

"Where? There's no such place and you know it. If you mean that area, then explain what you're doing here, fast. Spying?"

"No... No, I wasn't..."

"Leave him alone, can't you!" snapped Crawford suddenly. "Hasn't he been through enough with those rebel bastards? He was the only one of his family that got out alive and now the friends he was going to join are dead. All he needs is for you to turn on him as well. Come on, sit down over here," she said to McMahon comfortingly, motioning him to one of the bunks. McMahon sat down slowly, looking like a man in shock. Harbin caught on and threw the questioner a look of distaste.

"Well, where the hell is he from?" the white-suited man sighed.

"Victoria Drive, Birkenhead, if you must know," Crawford improvised hastily.

"I believe *they* call it Revolution Drive now," muttered the man. "We'll worry about that if we have to. For now, you'll be kept in here and monitored for symptoms and state of health. You can pull the curtain if you want privacy, but we can open them from here if you don't answer us." He shuffled papers in front of him and cleared his throat. "Now, first of all, I want you to tell me how you feel. Any of you feeling uncomfortable

physically?"

"Only from being cooped up in here," Crawford replied.

"How about you others? No? Right, if you could just lie on the bunks and tape the monitors to your skin - there's a diagram above your heads - and put the end of the probe under your tongue... It's a temperature sensor, in case you're worried."

The historians looked at each other, then did as they were asked. The man behind the screen studied readouts they couldn't see and made notes on a chart.

"That'll do nicely, thanks. I'm sorry to say your visit to Welwyn was not without result. You all have rising temperatures and other symptoms of the disease."

"You're sure?" McMahon asked, turning pale. "I mean are you..."

"I'm Doctor Captain Flemyng of the Royal Army Medical Corps - number one Anti-Bacterial Defence and Biochemical Sterilisation unit. Abdabs, for short, very appropriately. Yes, I've seen enough of this little swine's effects to know when it's about. I'm getting used to it, though I hope I never am. This war's dehumanised enough people without my joining them." He stood up slowly and picked up his helmet. "I'll leave you to yourselves for a while," he said. "Someone will be in to check on you in an hour or so." He put his helmet on, checked all his suit's seals carefully and left the unit.

The three historians stayed silent for a few minutes, then McMahon said hollowly: "Three days... I can't believe it..."

"I'm afraid I can," replied Lesley

Crawford. "You wanted living history, gentlemen. You got it."

"There's no point in arguing about it now..." Harbin began.

"Why not?" demanded McMahon. "There's as much point in our doing that as anything else. We won't accomplish a thing now, you realise that, don't you?"

"Will the others come after us?" Harbin asked.

"I should hope not," sighed Crawford. "Will three extra dead people in a depopulated city make much difference to history? I can't see it somehow. We were lucky not to be shot as rebel spies - if we survive, we still might be." She glared at McMahon. "A historian should at least remember the history of where he lives!"

"I wasn't born in Wirral City," McMahon protested. "I just live there, and it seems like it's always been there..."

"Well, it isn't there now!" Lesley snapped. "It's lucky for you that I studied history at Wirral University and know the area. I'm too warm in here... is this thing overheated or what?" She fumbled with the clumsy fastenings on her coat and struggled out of it. McMahon and Harbin followed suit. All three of them were perspiring freely by now as fever took hold.

"Here are the readings, sir," the lieutenant said, handing them to Flemyng. She pointed to some figures. "As you can see, those three in number four are well into it."

Flemyng grimaced and nodded. "Why does someone always wander past the warning markers? We make them big

and clear enough. These are classic second-day readings... You'd better make sure the tank under number four is full for tomorrow. Did you talk to them at all?"

"No, they were unconscious the whole time. Rather early for that, isn't it?"

"It depends on the person concerned... but three of them at once? Well, we should be used to the unusual by now. Maintain checks on them - whose turn is it next?"

"Harley's. It'll be the first case of this he's seen..."

"Could be his baptism of fire."

"Yeah, and *their* baptism in acid! Do you want me to go with him?"

"No, I will. I don't think he'll have any problems, but if he does, it's my responsibility."

Second Lieutenant Harley studied the readings and made notes, which he passed to Flemmyng beside him.

"Temperatures still high, but steady. All three are still unconscious, sir."

"Still unconscious? Most cases would be dead by now. Respiration rates surprisingly high, pulse rates slowing... all three of them. Open the curtain, Harley."

The curtain opened and Flemmyng looked into the isolation unit. Crawford, in her underwear, lay face upwards on her bunk, items of her outer clothing flung on the floor or draped over the edge of the bunk. Harbin and McMahon lay on their bunks, Harbin curled on one

side, McMahon face down. They were each covered by a single sheet, their clothes in a heap by the bunks. Flemmyng studied their complexions thoughtfully.

"No skin mottling," he commented. "No signs of swellings that I can see from here. That's never happened before - this little monster gives you the works. We'll increase the number of checks to one every half an hour, and if they wake up, call me over here."

"Urrgghh..." Crawford uttered unhappily. She didn't like what she was tasting and didn't like to think how it had ended up on her tongue.

"Welcome back," said a voice.

Crawford opened her eyes - she swore her eyelids actually creaked - and looked at the source of the greeting. Another person in a white isolation suit, not Flemmyng this time, was actually smiling at her.

"What time is it?" she asked automatically before feeling very foolish.

The woman behind the screen grinned. "Saturday," she replied. "Saturday the tenth of August nineteen ninety-six A.D. - all day. How do you feel?"

"I wish I didn't," groaned Crawford. She looked across to where Harbin and McMahon were stirring feebly.

"You almost got your wish," the woman replied. "By rights, you should have done. Can you sit up?"

"Do I have to? Everything feels like I haven't used it for a week."

"Just five days, actually. I'll get the

machinery to pop some food in to you - you *are* hungry, aren't you?"

Crawford considered this and realised that somewhere among all the other discomforts lurked several large pangs of hunger. She sat up, not enjoying it at all, and leaned against the wall for support.

"Is a phaser dangerous? Er...is a tiger dangerous?" she replied.

"It depends which of you's better armed. Here." The woman pressed a button and a tray slid out of the wall above Crawford's lap. On it was a variety of foods, mostly green.

"It doesn't taste wonderful, but it's food," added the woman as Crawford picked up a knife and fork. As she began eating, she saw Flemyng enter the observation area.

"How do they look, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"See for yourself, sir," she replied. "One awake, the others coming around."

McMahon rolled over and groaned as he tried to sit up. Harbin began to stir and, from his expression, was obviously tasting the same as Crawford had. Flemyng stared at them.

"All three of them? That's impossible, or should be. Grayson, get a message to regional command and tell them someone just survived this little devil. I want these three to undergo a full range of tests - including a check on their DNA, understand?"

"Understood, sir," she replied and moved to a side console, where she began encoding the message.

Flemyng continued to stare at the

historians, his manner puzzled.

"How do you feel? Apart from lousy and hungry, that is."

"I have a headache you wouldn't believe," groaned McMahon.

"I feel hung over," Harbin said bluntly.

Flemyng studied readings. "No abnormal temperatures, pulses all normal, respiration rates okay..."

"Somebody hand me my clothes," said Crawford, remembering she was supposed to cover herself up in this era.

"You threw them there," groaned Harbin. "You pick them up. Hey, how long have we been in here?" he asked as he looked around for his own garments.

"This is the seventh day," Flemyng replied. "You spent five of them unconscious. I'll pop some food in for you two - eat it, you'll need it. After that, I'm going to need your co-operation and you're going to need to give it."

Crawford was somewhat bewildered by succeeding events, Harbin and McMahon possibly even more so - as well as openly frustrated by their continuing confinement. At the same time, all three were amazed how rapidly the time was passing.

Once they'd dressed and eaten the bland but sustaining food, they'd been provided with isolation suits and taken from the sealed unit to the area they'd been approaching before they were apprehended. Flemyng and Grayson ushered them inside a large, low-roofed white structure, where they removed the isolation suits.

"Through here," Flemyng instructed them as he opened a door.

They entered a large room that was filled with bulky-looking equipment attended by some intense-looking people. Grayson pointed to a row of chairs and told them to sit down and wait. Harbin looked nervous, McMahon impatient. Crawford looked around the room to see if she could identify any of the equipment. She guessed that some of the consoles fed to primitive computers, but was still puzzling over a squat, bulky object opposite her when Flemyng returned with three orderlies.

"I'd like to say that this won't hurt, but I'm not a very good liar, so I'll just say that none of it should be harmful to you. Firstly, we just need a few samples from you. Urine's the easiest, so if you'll accompany these people to the appropriate areas..."

Crawford suspected that she had been assigned a female orderly for some reason other than the length of a straw. She hadn't expected the people of this era to be quite so paranoid.

"Take this and go behind the screen," the orderly instructed, handing her a small container. Crawford eyed it speculatively.

"I'll need a bigger one than that..." she began.

"We don't want all of it, just enough to fill this phial. The rest can follow the usual route." She pointed to behind the screen and Crawford followed her directions. The orderly shook her head. "Don't they pee where you come from, or something?" she demanded.

"I just never had to give a sample of it before. What do you expect to find in it?"

"I won't be looking," replied the orderly as Crawford returned. "Sit down here." She wrote out a label and affixed it to the phial. "Blood sample next," she announced and produced a hypodermic syringe.

Crawford eyed the needle with alarm and winced when its point pierced the skin of her arm. Once the sample had been withdrawn, she examined the abused limb and speculated about the size of the resulting bruise. The orderly transferred the blood to another phial, which she labelled appropriately.

The tests seemed to go on endlessly and with scarcely a pause. They checked her reflexes, took a skin sample - which Crawford enjoyed even less than the blood sampling - and tested the depth of her breathing. She was told to disrobe and lie on a table under a heavy-looking item of equipment, which she later realised was an X-ray scanner. Grayson appeared and gave her a physical examination as well as asking various questions concerning not merely her health but her opinions and recent experiences as well. It was during this that Crawford wondered where they had taken her 'book' and her 'torch'.

She suppressed a groan as her mind conjured up pictures of twentieth century engineers discovering the workings of a transtater and reproducing it en masse. She was in no position to recover them at the moment.

Grayson finally finished questioning her and told her to get dressed. The orderly led her back to the waiting area, where Harbin was already sitting. McMahon rejoined them a few minutes later and they quietly compared notes on their experiences, once the orderlies moved out of earshot.

"Was that an X-ray machine? But it

was so huge!"

"They did have spray-hypos, but they weren't very widespread - and they could only inject."

"Why did they want to test my knees? I'm obviously not dead..."

"Did you see where they took my equipment?" Crawford asked anxiously.

The others shook their heads and looked suddenly worried. Crawford speculated as to whether she could be keelhaunched by her Captain if he didn't notice any difference in history - assuming she returned to the Enterprise.

Flemyng reappeared and asked them if they wanted anything as the results would be a while.

"I would like my book back," Crawford ventured. "I'm halfway through it and I'd like to know the ending."

"I'll see what we can do. We have some newspapers, if you're interested."

Harbin and McMahon tried not to beg for them. Flemyng produced a bundle of scruffy-looking journals from a rack.

"None of them very up-to-date, I'm afraid," he apologised, handing them over.

"We're rather out of touch ourselves," Crawford replied as Harbin and McMahon scanned the crumpled pages eagerly. She opened one of the newspapers, noticed that it was dated for the previous Thursday, and began to read it.

"*The Times*," she said. "Wasn't that quite a popular name for such papers?"

"There were a few around the world, I believe," said Harbin. "This one's called *The Daily Express*. It's still a week out of date, though. I don't remember any of these names in our standard texts," he added, pointing to a news item.

"That's about two entertainment media personalities," Crawford told him, reading over his shoulder. "That's interesting," she added, catching sight of a headline further down the page. "I'd never realised Gaines was still president of the United Americas..."

"United States of America," McMahon corrected her. "He was... will be until next January. Despite the war, they insist on holding an election in November, which Gaines loses to Howard Graham."

"And no two historians can agree whether Graham would have beaten President Shepard if the latter hadn't been assassinated in June," Harbin added. "Or on how honest the election was under the conditions."

"Did they still practise folk remedies like this?" McMahon asked in alarm.

"That's an advertisement," Harbin explained. "That paper was notorious for misleading items like that. I think it closed before the end of the war... look out, here comes someone."

A white-coated figure was approaching them, Grayson and Flemyng behind her. The newcomer looked at the historians curiously.

"Do you find those papers interesting?" she asked.

"Fascinating..." said McMahon then looked up sharply. "Well, we've been out of touch lately."

"Please come with us," the woman said in a tone that implied it wasn't a request.

"Where to?" Crawford asked suspiciously.

"Just another part of the building," Flemyng reassured her. "This lady wishes to ask you a few questions - nothing serious. Your first results have come back and we just need to know a bit about your background, that's all."

"Our background?"

"I'm from the Ministry of Defence," the woman informed her. "Technically I'm responsible for this installation and others like it, as well as Captain Flemyng and the other Abdabs units. You survived a previously completely fatal disease and we want to know why."

"Then we can make it even less fatal," Grayson added.

"This isn't the place to talk about that, though. Come with us."

The interview room was bare-walled with a single door. The woman, who finally introduced herself as Victoria Burgess, a junior defence minister, sat behind a table and motioned the historians to three chairs the other side of it. Flemyng and Grayson sat behind and to either side of her. Through the window in the door, Crawford could make out a pair of uniformed armed guards. Burgess smiled as she caught her glancing at them.

"Standard procedure, these days," she explained. "It doesn't mean we expect trouble. Now," she said, opening a folder in front of her, "Captain Flemyng reports that you, Mr. McMahon, at least, have

recently come from rebel-held territory. Is that correct?"

"Well, not that recently..." McMahon began.

"How recently then?"

"A couple of weeks, we reckon," Crawford put in hastily. "You lose track of time after a few days."

"How did you get through the lines?" Burgess asked.

"The lines?" McMahon looked bewildered.

"Good god, the siege lines, man! If you came from that area within the last two years you'll know it's under siege and the port is blockaded. Anyone leaving risks being shot by rebels or enemy troops or by our forces, if they don't give a good reason for approaching them. So, how did you get through?"

"Under cover of darkness, just myself..."

"That was pretty good going, considering the night-vision stuff that we have monitoring the area. Still, I suppose one person might just do it. Did they have any of their facilities where you were?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think? Those Eugenecist bastards and their monsters, of course. And those rebel scum who went over to them. Did you see any biological warfare apparatus or installations while you were there?"

"No, none."

"Well, I'm not surprised. The number of raids we make on the area, it'd

be more likely to get loose and kill them first. We thought you might have picked up a minor strain of the germ - an earlier edition as it were - and acquired an immunity."

"What about us?" Harbin asked.

Burgess seemed to notice him suddenly. "If he'd still been carrying the weaker strain, you could have become infected and acquired the same immunity. Dr. Grayson, did you find any such bacterial strain in the samples you took?"

"We found only the remnants of the fatal strain in their blood samples. The weaker strain could have been eliminated altogether, I suppose."

"Of course, the monsters would probably be immune anyway," Burgess added. "No sense in dropping a lethal bug on someone if it's going to get you too. DNA tests show all of you to be true Humans, though, so that's out. Maybe the rebels have a vaccine, but in that case they'd have one that didn't leave them unconscious for a few days - they could be overrun in that time, if our troops wrapped up well. Besides, I don't think the Eugenists would really give them one that worked anyway. So, you're just like the rest of us, except you can survive this disease. Why?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," sighed Crawford. "Just lucky, I guess."

Burgess looked irritated, but forced a smile. "Luckier than anyone else who was in that area unprotected. Before I forget," she added, reaching into a box by her feet, "your book and your torch. These are they, are they not?"

Crawford looked at them closely, although Burgess kept them firmly on the table.

"Those are mine, yes. Can I have them back, please?"

"Interesting book," Burgess said, ignoring the question. She studied the title. "Hitler and the Third Reich" she quoted. "And you want it back so you can find out how it ends. I'll tell you - he shoots himself. Happy now? Funny thing is, we couldn't get the last half of the book to open. And this torch - it works beautifully, gives a nice bright light. Pretty good going, especially when we found out it doesn't have anywhere for you to put batteries, plug it into a recharger or even solar cells. So just where the hell did they come from - and don't say Japan."

Crawford sat in silence. After giving the matter careful thought, she decided to stay silent.

"Don't you know?" Burgess asked sardonically. "Well, then; here we have three people, at least one of whom has purportedly come from hostile territory, who have blundered into a region recently hit by a deadly bug-bomb. Not just slightly into the area, mark you, but smack in the main exposure zone. They exhibit all the symptoms they deserve within a short time and then do what no-one else, in our experience, has done. They recover, apparently without any ill effects and without becoming carriers.

"They wear clothes of unsurprising ordinariness and of materials that seem quite commonplace - until someone took a look at them under the electron microscope at a nearby Polytechnic. Right molecules - funny orientation though. The synthetics were no problem, but the cotton in those jeans and the wool in those slacks...

"Then we have a torch that works with no apparent power source and a book that only goes halfway before

running out of pages. Funny thing about that torch - one of the people studying it tried its settings and found one that didn't give any light until he squeezed the control slide. Then his assistant fell unconscious.

"Also they carry some little flat discs that look like wine gums or some such - except that they each contain enough nutrition for a day for one person.

"Lastly, we come to the medical reports on these three people. Checks on their DNA show that they have not been genetically engineered, despite their surviving a disease that no-one else has, to our knowledge. X-rays show them to be quite Human, blood, urine, skin samples all show them to be quite healthy. In fact, there are some organisms missing that we expected to find in the urine samples. Probably something to do with a sensible diet. The two men are fairly fit specimens - probably sedentary clerical workers or some such, taking the usual forms of social exercise. The woman, however, is from a different background.

She looked Crawford in the eyes. "You've been through a pretty rigorous training routine, haven't you, Ms. Crawford? Military training, almost certainly, and you've kept it up on a regular basis too. Old habits die hard perhaps? Maybe it's the hardships of the last few years, plus the fact that you never know who, or what, you're going to run into. Or are you still in someone's army? It's not ours, because we never made that equipment. And no-one else has anything like it, not even the 'heirs of humanity'.

"So, what does that tell us? You're Human, no doubt about that. You know the area you claim to be from, but apparently not well enough to get its

name right first time. Your clothes and possessions look right, but aren't from anywhere on this planet. We would have taken the book and the torch apart, but we were curious to see how you'd react to our findings - and we had orders not to start dismantling anything."

"Orders?" Harbin asked.

"Oh, yes, there's still someone giving the orders. As soon as my superiors saw the preliminary reports they wanted to know everything we found out without damaging you or your property. Now, why do you think that was?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Crawford, frowning. "Who are your superiors?"

Burgess stared at her, wide-eyed. "Now I know you're not from this planet," she said. "A junior minister only reports to a senior minister these days, in my case the Defence Secretary, the Right Honourable Stephen Chester MP."

"Defence Secretary?" McMahon asked puzzledly.

"Nineteen ninety-six..." Harbin muttered. "Yes, that's right..."

"Shut up!" snapped Crawford suddenly. "Remember where you are."

Burgess stood up suddenly. "That settles it. They're coming with me. Captain Flemmyng, Dr. Grayson, you will not discuss this with anyone else, nor will any of your staff, is that clear? You've all signed the Freedom Of Information Act 1993 as it is. All data and records on these people are to be turned over to me before we leave. Any remaining samples of material from their clothing included. Continue working on the biological samples though - I can't help feeling they

hold the answers to some of our questions." She regarded the three subjects warily. "Stay here and don't try to leave, for your sakes as well as ours," she cautioned them. "The guards will stay outside until we're ready to go."

"Where are we going?" demanded Crawford.

"The next step up," replied Burgess enigmatically as she left the room, the file gripped firmly under her arm. Flemyng and Grayson followed her out and the door was locked behind them.

"I knew I should have kept an eye on those bloody things," muttered Crawford.

"They'd probably have taken them anyway," Harbin replied. "I don't know when they took samples from our clothing, do you?"

"I never noticed anything was missing," McMahon told them. "It must have been during the physicals."

"Do you think they've guessed the truth?" Harbin asked.

"I think they've decided we're extraterrestrials," Crawford answered, "who just happen to be human beings. Most people always wanted superior beings to be just like them anyway - it confirmed their own suspicions."

"Why do you think they want to take all the records away?" asked McMahon.

"Would *you* want that stuff lying around? Maybe they want to destroy it to be on the safe side."

"And us too?"

"Well, I'd prefer not to think so, but

this is a very paranoid culture at a time of extreme crisis. There's not much we can do about it, under the circumstances. Have you still got those newspapers? We might as well carry on reading..."

Victoria Burgess urged them along the corridor impatiently.

"Come on, we haven't got all day," she ordered brusquely. "Right, the car's just outside..."

"Won't we need isolation suits?" asked McMahon worriedly.

"We're sticking to the clean areas," Burgess assured him. "There are some in the boot anyway." She led them outside to where a well-used car was parked. The driver emerged and opened the door for her as she approached.

"You three get in the back with the sergeant here," she told them, gesturing towards one of the guards. "It'll be a squeeze, but you should manage it. I'm afraid we can't run a large car for a trip like this, even on compressed methane. Right," she said as they bundled into the back seat and she tipped the seat back. "Start her up, Vic, and let's get back to base." She sat down in the passenger seat and shut the door as the car's engine roared alarmingly and the vehicle moved jerkily forward. Crawford noticed the locks were all controlled from the front of the car.

Crawford tried to get comfortable without sitting on anyone's lap, especially as the sergeant's was occupied by a sub-machine gun. She made a determined effort to make McMahon narrower and tried not to wonder if the gun had a safety catch or if a bumpy road would set it off.

Fortunately her fears about the gun

were unjustified, although the roads lived up to expectations. The driver clearly knew the route, despite the complete lack of road signs. Occasionally they passed columns of troops on foot or in lorries. Some accompanied people in different uniforms, some of whom might have been prisoners.

"Yes, we still take them a lot of the time," Burgess answered when Harbin asked about one group under guard. "If they're in uniform and we think we can handle them safely. I don't think their side reciprocates, mind you," she added darkly. "At least, if they do, they never let us know who they are. Oh, hell, what's this?" she demanded as the car approached a checkpoint.

Two soldiers approached the car as it slowed down. Burgess waved her identification at one of them and he waved them through. The junior minister looked critically at the picture on her card.

"They recognised me from this? I must look worse than I thought. It's not so bad down here," she told the passengers in the back. "Go a hundred miles North and they'd open fire if you didn't look like stopping on the white lines. Any further than that you need an escort anyway."

"Where are we going?" asked Crawford.

"To the Government's headquarters in this area. We had to get out of London fairly rapidly in ninety-two, so it's not dreadfully impressive. It works though."

The journey wore on as the driver negotiated them around unexpected diversions and bridges that were having minor, but important, sections replaced. Finally they turned into a drive which took them deep underground. The car

came to a halt and the driver jumped out and opened the passenger door.

"Everybody out!" cried Burgess, rolling her shoulders to relieve the cramp. Crawford had never been so glad to obey a command.

Burgess led them along a stretch of corridor and down two flights of stairs, the guard behind them the whole time. She opened a door into a small office and spoke briefly to a young woman, then re-emerged.

"We're expected," she told them and took them to the end of the corridor. She opened the door into a large office, centrepiece of which was a long table with about twenty chairs arranged around it. Only two were occupied at present.

In the largest of the chairs sat a tall man of about sixty with untidy grey hair and dark brown eyes. He looked up and smiled as he saw Burgess entering.

The other occupant of the room was a man in his mid-thirties, also quite tall, with short, dark hair and dark blue eyes that looked the new arrivals up and down critically. He was sitting on the edge of the table, one foot on the floor, the other resting on a chair. McMahon looked at him open-mouthed until Crawford nudged him in the ribs. The sergeant saluted the two men, who looked at each other ruefully.

"Well, Victoria," said the older man, "you got here without any problems?"

"Not too many, Prime Minister. The bridge is out over the Lea again. I think we'd better check into that and find out if someone's supplying us with sub-standard repair parts," Burgess told them.

"If they are, they'll regret it," said

the other man. "The engineers will give us a full report when they get back. How are things in Welwyn?"

"Messy. Communications are being restored and the medical unit's fully operational now. That's where we found these three, Minister."

Crawford whispered something to Harbin, who giggled.

"What's so funny?" demanded Stephen Chester.

Crawford fought to control her expression. "Take me to your leader..." she repeated aloud.

The Prime Minister frowned momentarily then burst out laughing, as did Chester and Burgess. The sergeant looked slightly outraged. Chester nodded slowly.

"Yes, well put," he said. "All right, Victoria, leave us the file and let us talk to these people alone, will you?"

"If you're sure..."

"Yes, I'm sure. Sergeant Gowan, you can wait outside."

"Are you sure you'll be safe, sir?" the sergeant asked uncertainly.

"Positive," Chester produced a revolver from a drawer and placed it on the table. "I don't think I'll need this, but it should make you feel better."

"As you wish, sir!" Gowan replied, saluting.

"Thank you, Sergeant," replied Chester. "Oh, sergeant!" he called, as Gowan made to leave.

"Sir?"

"I'm a civilian. Don't salute me."

"Sir!" Gowan replied, saluting smartly, and opened the door. He and Burgess left the room, shutting the door behind them. The Prime Minister indicated the chairs opposite him and asked the historians to sit down.

"In case you haven't guessed," he told them, "my name is Arthur Douglas. I am Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and have been since late nineteen ninety-one. This gentleman here is Stephen Chester, Secretary of State for Defence and my deputy."

"Now," said Chester, "who are you?"

As the historians introduced themselves, Chester looked quickly through the file Burgess had left them. He looked at McMahon.

"So, you're the one who comes from a place called Wirral City..."

"Well, I..."

"A place that doesn't exist..."

"Well, no..."

"Yet."

All three historians looked at him sharply and he smiled wryly.

"Right first time. I was planning to call it something like that, but now I'm sure. I'd already decided that *that* city would no longer exist after the war and was planning that we build up either side of it."

"No longer exist?" McMahon asked.

"No. There's not a lot left, as it is - just a hard core of diehard rebels,

clustered around a battered building with a bent bird on the top of it. Yet more proof that however thoroughly you bomb someone, you still have to send in the infantry to clean up afterwards. Would you believe we actually found some survivors in central London? Not many, and from deep in the Underground, but it does reinforce the point."

"But it hasn't stopped you blasting the hell out of the city at intervals," Arthur Douglas reminded him.

Chester shrugged. "When our commanders on the spot reckon the infantry can go in in reasonable safety, we'll send them in. I'm concerned about minimising casualties on our side, not theirs. We don't count clones or other monsters anyway."

Harbin looked shocked. "But, even so, your treatment of them might affect their treatment of your men when they capture them..." he protested.

"It never has yet. Most of the time they don't bother," replied Douglas. "The Geneva Convention hasn't been forgotten - just ignored. They chose not to treat our people humanely and we decided to interpret human rights as pertaining to Humans, not the products of genetic engineering or eugenics."

"So that's why all the tests," said Crawford.

"You could have been monsters, especially after surviving that nasty little germ, but your DNA hadn't been tampered with, so we knew you were Human. We did wonder if you were spies, until we tried to read your book. So, just what are you doing here? Or should I say here and now?"

Crawford exchanged glances with her colleagues and found them even more

bewildered than herself.

"Well, we guessed you had to be from the future," Chester added. "No-one now or before now has equipment like you were carrying and I don't see anyone doing so for some considerable time." He sighed. "Look, we don't want to know what era you come from or even what happens between now and then. You've already told us we win this war."

"How - ?" Harbin demanded.

"You recognised us. If we lost, humanity - true humanity, that is - would be systematically exterminated by Khan Singh and his monsters. Our names would be removed from the history books. The fact that you are Humans and don't spit at the sight of us is probably the best news we've had since the raid on Joaquin's headquarters. What I don't understand is why anyone would choose to visit this era."

"We know so little about it!" McMahon blurted. "So much was lost, so many records..."

"Maybe you're better off that way," replied Douglas. "It's not a time to be proud of. We know we have to win this war, and we haven't taken any half-measures to do so - especially not against the rebels in the North-West."

"A lot of records were destroyed when some of the major cities were," Chester added. "London's should still be intact, but they'll glow in the dark for a while yet. Don't even bother about any of the major U.S. cities - I don't think the enemy was so keen to preserve them. Our advantage was that they wanted to capture the world, not destroy it. We intend to destroy them, whatever it takes. The upshot of which is that we have less compunction than they do..."

A telephone warbled on the desk and Douglas answered it. After a couple of brief exchanges, he passed the instrument to Chester. The Defence Secretary listened to the caller's voice impassively.

"They got that far?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. "Any resistance?... Really?... Did they bring back some good pictures?... Good.... Anything there?... Fine, how about those dockyard shore batteries?... You're sure?... What about the city itself?... Yes, I thought they might. Anything else happened?... Yes, we knew about the relief convoy. Any word from Squadron Leader Willis yet?... That's over a week now. Has anyone seen the chief bastard in that time?... Well, we can only hope he did.

"Right, contact Admiral Squires and tell him to move those ships into position just outside the harbour. They're to work in conjunction with the R.A.F. and Army units already in place... Yes, floating siege guns is right. That harbour's going to come in very handy as a second line of assault. Yes, report to me when they're ready. Goodbye."

He switched off the telephone and turned to Douglas. "It shouldn't be much longer now. Reconnaissance pictures taken this morning show the harbour defences are out of action. The planes encountered little or no resistance until they approached the city centre and a couple of antique SAMs whistled past them."

"Still no news of Willis?" Douglas asked.

"Nothing at all, and not a sign of Khan Singh. My guess is that Willis is dead. I just hope he managed to put Khan in the same state first."

"Any ideas?" Douglas enquired.

McMahon looked towards Crawford, who glared and shook her head. Douglas interpreted the movements correctly.

"Don't tell us," he told them. "We'll find out by ourselves. Could there be any connection with the raid on...?"

He was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door and Burgess leaned into the room.

"Turn on the radio - their frequency!" she told them.

Chester adjusted the dials on a heavy-looking receiver and a man's voice, distorted by static, sounded from the speaker.

"...suggesting that we should surrender to their forces." The voice had a slight speech impediment, but carried the speaker's fervour most effectively. "I take this as a good sign for our cause - a sign that they are weakening and on the edge of capitulation, for why else should they seek to trick us into giving up the fight?"

"He's going on with it," groaned Douglas.

"The cause of our revolution grows stronger by the day, the hour, the minute, the second," the voice went on. "We shall continue the fight against tyranny and neo-imperialism until it is utterly destroyed. Now, more than ever, is there reason to look forward to the coming struggles, for they are struggles from which we shall emerge victorious!"

"Damn you," Douglas muttered, shaking his head. He switched off the radio. He looked up, saw Chester lifting the receiver on the telephone. "What are you doing?"

"We've had our answer," replied the defence secretary. "Now it's our turn to respond. Yes... Hello? Chester here... We heard it. Well, you know our answer. All units are to commence final stage as soon as they're in position. I want progress reports every hour, if possible. No. No, no-one from the centre. They had their chance. Right, goodbye."

Douglas sighed deeply. "I thought we'd made ourselves clear..."

"Not to that old fool," Chester replied bitterly. "He refuses to acknowledge reality, and condemns his people to death as a result."

Crawford, Harbin and McMahon exchanged glances.

"You've ordered the final assault on the rebel headquarters," Harbin said.

Chester nodded. "I knew we'd have to. They weren't going to give up, even to save the lives of the non-combatants in the city."

"I thought there might be a chance," said Douglas, shaking his head. "That's why I appealed to them to surrender and save some lives on both sides."

Chester smiled ruefully. "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din," he replied. "At least we can get the rebellion out of the way and concentrate on the real war. Now I know we'll win, I can feel a little optimistic. It still won't be a picnic after the fighting's over."

"No," agreed Douglas. "I'm not looking forward to governing over the reconstruction period."

The three historians decided not to tell him he needn't worry about it. Crawford smiled slightly.

"Well, it seems the war was inevitable - as far as we can tell," she said.

"I don't know," sighed Douglas. "Maybe if things had been different it could have been. Maybe if the UN team had spotted what was going on in Morgen's research centre, or if the resolutions against Khan Singh's encroachment on Bangladesh had been acted upon. Maybe even if my predecessor had called an election in 1987 instead of hanging on for the fifth year and being manoeuvred out of office by the Spineless Coalition things might have been different. Maybe if we'd compromised in 1992..."

"Surrendered, you mean," snapped Chester. "Surrender a piece at a time, that was their plan. If we'd done as they demanded, they would have been stronger when the war started. As it was, we forced them to act before they were fully ready. A lot of traitors were caught out that way, before they could scramble for cover."

"And a lot of terrorists turned out to be working for them," Douglas added. He laughed briefly. "It was pretty hilarious the speed with which the Yanks withdrew their covert funding from Ireland when they learned the truth. President Shepard had to replace a few cabinet members all at once. Well, so much for the lessons of history. What do we do with you three?"

"Do with us?" McMahon asked.

"We can't let you wander around your own past haphazardly," Chester explained. "Do you have a time machine to locate?"

"As I understand it," Crawford told him, "we just get uplifted at an appropriate moment."

"Well, who knows when that may be? You'd better stay here until we have a better idea." Chester pressed a button on the desk and Sergeant Gowan entered the room and saluted.

"Sir!" he acknowledged.

"Escort our... visitors to the accommodation block, sergeant," Douglas ordered. "Here," he addressed the historians, "take these with you." He handed them the torch and book and the files on themselves. Crawford looked surprised and Chester smiled.

"We don't want any of that stuff left lying around here, do we?" he explained.

Sergeant Gowan saluted again and left with his three charges. Chester groaned as the door closed.

"I keep telling them not to salute us. It's a waste of time and energy and completely out of date. What's the point of showing someone your hand's empty when you could have a bomb wrapped up in your tunic?"

"It keeps them happy, so why worry about it?" Douglas answered. "People from the future... It still seems unbelievable."

"We live in pretty unbelievable times, Arthur. Look on the bright side - we know now that it hasn't all been for nothing."

There was a knock on the door and Burgess came in carrying a folder. She seemed excited about something and was breathing hard as if she'd been running.

"What is it, Victoria?" Douglas asked her.

"This just came in from Flemyng," she replied. "It's the results from the

samples they took from those three... visitors."

"Well, we know they're Human..." began Chester.

"Better than that, they survived the virus from the bomb and left us samples of the antibodies responsible in their blood samples. Flemyng believes he has just enough to produce an inoculant."

"From three samples?"

She nodded. "Apparently. This little fellow likes nothing better than to reproduce..."

"Randy little devil!" said Chester in some surprise. "Sorry, go on."

"He says he can produce enough to lay the groundwork for an immunisation programme. If he's right..."

"Then the enemy will have to think up something else to plague us with," said Douglas.

"And that might take them quite some time," said Chester, "since the S.A.S. destroyed their main biochemical research centre."

"Tell Flemyng to start tests as soon as he's ready," Douglas ordered. "It'll make a nice change to work on saving some lives."

Douglas leaned back in his chair as Burgess left the room.

"Now, have they altered the future or not?" he asked. "Was that antibody supposed to turn up here and now?"

"Maybe it was," replied Chester cheerfully. "It helps us along, anyway."

"I suppose you're right. There's just

one thing that puzzles me a little. When that young woman said 'Take me to your leader', she was looking at *you*."

"Through here," grunted Gowan, opening a door.

The historians shrugged and walked through into a seemingly-endless corridor. Crawford clutched the bundle tightly under her left arm.

"How long do you reckon we'll have to stay here?" McMahon asked.

"Not long," replied Harbin. "Look ahead of us."

At the end of the corridor they could see not the accommodation units they were expecting but a familiar circular object. As they approached it, all three jumped high in the air and through its centre. Crawford landed lightly on her toes and was relieved to find herself face to face with Mr. Spock. Behind him, Uhura gave an audible sigh of relief at their return.

"Lieutenant Crawford reporting back from assignment, sir," she greeted him.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant, gentlemen," Spock replied. "Have you accomplished your mission?"

"I believe so, sir."

Spock nodded. "Lieutenant Uhura, inform the ship we are ready to beam up."

"I recommend we undergo decontamination procedure on our arrival, sir," Crawford advised.

"Miss Uhura, have the transporter

chief prepare for decontamination on our arrival."

"Transporter room reports ready, sir."

"Energise."

Kirk took his seat in the briefing room and addressed the landing-party.

"I've read all your reports from the recent mission on the Forever Planet," he told them. "I hope it provided some useful data on that period of history."

Harbin nodded. "We know a little more about conditions then," he acknowledged.

"I'm pleased to hear that. I'm not so pleased that the three of you were infected by a potentially-lethal disease within seconds of your arrival. Still, you didn't pick the landing-spot and you did survive. However, in my view this only highlights the risks involved in the use of such apparatus and confirms my belief that those risks outweigh any benefits to our knowledge of history. Of course, I don't expect you gentlemen to agree with me..."

"But, Captain, we do!" exclaimed Harbin.

"You do?" enquired Kirk, taken aback.

"Yes," said McMahon. "Having come so close to altering our own futures, we can appreciate the dangers of meddling with those of others. There's nothing like a taste of the past to make you appreciate the present."

"That's the problem with knowing about history," added Crawford. "It takes

the edge off nostalgia."



ALL ASHORE WHO'S GOING ASHORE

by

Nina Lynch & Tracy Beadle

Mr Spock stood quietly with his arms behind his back. He would much rather have been in his quarters studying the reports sent to him from the Vulcan Science Academy than attending this function. The Captain had requested the attendance of all senior officers, however, and he knew from past experience that such 'requests' constituted an order, so here he was, in uniform. From the various modes of dress of the other crewmembers he was sure that some had taken a few liberties with their uniforms.

Although, as a Vulcan, he had his own traditions that he followed, he could not understand this Human tradition of having a party to celebrate the end of a long mission, and the start of shore leave. Surely it would have been more logical to begin shore leave immediately than to delay it with a party that would last several hours.

He looked round the large room, noticing that although the number of people had not increased, the noise level had risen by several decibels. He could see Dr McCoy in agitated conversation with the Captain; both had glasses in their hands, which he had noticed being refilled on several occasions.

Suddenly Dr McCoy caught his eye, and taking his leave of the Captain strode

over to where Spock stood. Before the Doctor could give any form of greeting, Spock spoke.

"Dr McCoy, may I ask you a question?"

"You may." McCoy should have remembered that in all the years of his acquaintance with the Vulcan Science Officer, Spock had never indulged in small talk, and would always enter a conversation at the point he wanted, which he now proceeded to do.

"What is that substance in your glass?" He looked at the Doctor's drink with the same sort of fascination he had when encountering a new life form.

McCoy saw the look, raised his glass to eye level and said with deep reverence, "This, my dear Science Officer, is a large Martini." He lowered his glass and after taking a sip added, "Why?" There was bound to be a logical reason why his drink was a source of so much fascination to Spock; it must be either the party atmosphere, or the effect of the Martinis, but McCoy was quite prepared to hear the reason.

"I have noticed you drinking the same sort of drink all evening. Why do you persist in drinking it if it does not

quench your thirst?"

If it hadn't been for the serious look on Spock's face McCoy felt that he could have laughed out loud, but he managed to contain himself. Even after spending all this time with Humans, Spock still could not understand some basic concepts. McCoy turned to face Spock.

"I am drinking this for..." he paused, trying to choose the right word "...enjoyment." With all all-embracing gesture at the room with his free arm he added, "This is a party, and I'm going to enjoy myself. This helps." McCoy then had a devilish thought, and offering his half-empty glass to Spock smilingly asked, "Would you like some?" The smile, and the frivolity of his question, were wasted.

"No, thank you," was the answer he expected and received from Spock, who added, "I have had my thirst quenched with a glass of Altair water." *After all, Spock thought, the purpose of drinking IS to quench one's thirst.*

McCoy pulled a face. "Can't you relax for once? You sound like a monk."

"I am relaxed," came Spock's unemotional reply.

McCoy looked at Spock, who was standing almost to attention; as far as he could remember, the Vulcan had not moved for most of the evening. "Well, you don't look relaxed to me." He looked at his drink, and decided to try again. "Are you sure you don't want a drink?"

"When I see the effects of the constant drinking of alcoholic beverages by crewmembers the morning after, I feel the only logical things to do is to abstain," replied Spock.

There was no expression in his eyes,

but had he been Human McCoy would have thought Spock to be smug and superior. This was not the case; Spock was speaking the facts as he saw them, so McCoy decided to expand on the subject.

"That's all part of the fun of having a drink and enjoying yourself."

Spock raised an eyebrow, looked at the Doctor as though seeing him for the first time, and asked in complete seriousness, "Oh, and are you enjoying yourself?"

McCoy returned the look. Most of his good humour had vanished. "I was," he said, looking round at the other members of the crew enjoying themselves. Spock was a good acquaintance most of the time, but at functions he could definitely be a party-pooper. McCoy couldn't see anyone else he would like to engage in conversation, so he continued to talk to Spock.

"Changing the subject completely, are you planning to do anything interesting during your shore leave?" He himself had most definite plans.

"Yes. There is a paper I intend to study on the relationship between dilithium crystal lifespans and the prolongation of warp speeds when..."

McCoy decided he had heard enough. "That's not what I meant," he said. "Here we are on shore leave, forty-eight hours of R & R, a whole planet to be explored," he pointed out of the observation window to the planet they were orbiting, "and you want to stay on board ship and study a report. Can't you relax and let your hair down?"

Spock didn't answer for a while, and seemed diffident before giving his reply. "My hair is already down."

Why do Vulcans take everything so literally? thought McCoy, and was about to say something to that effect, but Spock carried on.

"And for your information, the planet has already been explored and well documented. Surely the purpose of R & R is to engage in something for which there is no time while on missions." Spock looked at McCoy and added slowly, "I shall enjoy studying the report."

"How can anyone enjoy reading a report?" Before Spock could give his answer McCoy carried on, "Now to enjoy a drink," he put his empty glass on a passing tray and took a full one, "and a good meal that has been prepared by hand, not by a machine," McCoy pointed accusingly at the food synthesizer, "that's something to look forward to."

"Synthetic food has reached a high standard lately, Doctor. Almost any combination of foodstuffs available can now be assembled to satisfy even the most hedonistic of you. Why the...?"

He stopped. McCoy was shaking his head. Did the Doctor still not understand?

"No doubt, no doubt." McCoy understood, all right, but felt that Spock did not. "But eating should be a pleasurable experience."

"I fail to understand why a necessity of life should be pleasurable," said Spock.

"You wouldn't," was the Doctor's curt reply.

"I also cannot understand how you expect to enjoy, let alone remember, your shore leave after the amount of alcohol you have consumed." As he spoke Spock

saw McCoy again exchange his glass for a full one.

McCoy glared at Spock and took another swig of his drink. He could definitely feel the effect of the alcohol in his bloodstream, and he decided to put Spock right once and for all.

"You don't have to remember everything to know you've enjoyed yourself, you just know it." He took yet another drink, and was in full flow of explanation before Spock could get a word in. "You just need to know how good the Martini is, how good the company," his gesture embraced the room, "how good the conversation." *But perhaps not this one*, he thought. "How relaxing it all is, compared to the intense monotony of performing biopsies on extra-terrestrial beings to see if they are still up to driving a spaceship. A party - that's the spirit."

Spock looked at McCoy; the word spirit reminded him of a conversation with someone recovering from the effects of a hangover, so he mused, "I have been informed that pink elephants are something that you remember after an over-indulgence in alcohol."

McCoy was now feeling fed-up, and replied grudgingly, "A special presence does seem to predominate after these occasions, certainly." *Especially if you don't take the anti-hangover pill.*

"And are white rabbits something you remember after shore leave?"

McCoy looked up at Spock. Did he actually possess a sense of humour? But the face was as stony as ever as Spock went in search of more intellectual conversation elsewhere.



